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Using Distance Education to Prepare School Administrators: Pitfalls and Effective Practice

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Abstract

The employment of practitioners and the expansion of distance education courses have become controversial issues in the preparation of school administrators. In large measure, both actions have been condemned by many senior professors, primarily because they believe that college administrators have pursued them for economic reasons rather than for educational improvement. First, the merits of this perception are examined. Second, the pitfalls and promises of each issue are identified and then recommendations are made for improving practice. The potentialities of involving practitioners in professional preparation and making pre-service and in-service education more accessible via distance education will not be realized unless regular faculty are committed to these ideas and deeply involved in making decisions about their deployment.

Noted scholar Donald Schön (1990) used a topographical analogy to describe the nature of problems common in professions. Dividing context into high ground and lowland, he characterized the former as dry and serene—territory where practitioners routinely attend to problems that lend themselves to research-based theory and techniques. He characterized the latter as swampy and unsettling—territory where practitioners encounter messy and confusing problems that defy textbook solutions. Schön observed that most professionals prefer to remain high and dry even though they realize their most significant and difficult quandaries are in the swamp. Arguably, the proliferation of distance education (DE) in the preparation of school administrators has become an insidious lowland dilemma. Though many professors acknowledge DE's dark side and though some have openly and vigorously criticized this instructional medium, few have been unwilling to descend into the swamp in order to explore this issue rationally (Kowalski, 2004).

This paper explores the pitfalls and promises of deploying DE as an instructional medium. Discussion of this topic begins with an overview of institutional motives; the intent is to demonstrate that competition and economics rather than professional and pedagogical purposes are responsible for DE's remarkable proliferation. Next, common deployment pitfalls and their negative consequences are identified. Third, the potential of DE to improve the preparation of school administration is examined. Last, policy recommendations are made in relation to DE's promises.

Motives and Resistance

Since the mid-1980s, university administrators have discovered that DE is potentially a "cash cow"; that is, the medium can be delivered "to a large number of paying customers without the expense of providing things such as temperature controlled classrooms and parking spaces" (Brown & Green, 2003, p. 149). Either willingly or under pressure from policy elites (e.g., state officials or trustees), university administrators have implemented DE, especially

in schools of education and especially at the graduate school level. In just four years, from 1995 to 1998, the percentage of post-secondary institutions using asynchronous Internet technologies for their DE offerings nearly tripled (Lewis, Snow, Farris, Levin, & Greene 1999). More recently, an Illinois study reported that online enrollment in higher education in that state increased 54% in the one year between 2001-02 and 2002-03 (Jorgensen, 2004). Very recent estimates indicate that approximately 90% of all colleges and universities now offer some form of DE (Levinson, 2005).

The development of DE degrees and courses, however, often has been mired in myths and skepticism. Consequently, important institutional decisions may have been based on unfounded hypotheses—such as believing that "shifting from bricks to clicks will transform learning" (Sherry, 2005, p. 374). In addition, online courses unquestionably have and continue to make many professors uncomfortable. The reasons why regular faculty feel uneasy are many and varied but the following are among the most notable causes:

- Philosophically, many faculty members are convinced that DE is an ineffective or possibly even unethical alternative to providing a college education—especially for traditional-aged students (O'Quinn & Corry, 2002).
- Many faculty members believe that this instructional strategy is vulnerable to externally set agendas (e.g., legislative efforts to reduce funding to higher education) (Calvert, 2005).
- Many faculty members resist DE simply because they have an aversion to change; that is, they want to continue teaching as they have in the past (Berge, 1998; Parisot, 1997).
- Some faculty members resist DE because they are not comfortable using technology (Parisot, 1997).
- Some faculty members resist DE because they are concerned about the possible effects on their job security (e.g., they fear that DE is being implemented to reduce personnel costs) (Maguire, 2005; McLean, 2005).

Referring specifically to educational administration, Fusarelli (2004) also argues that the development of school administrators is fundamentally and irrevocably an interpersonal, relational process that cannot take place via a disembodied and depersonalized delivery system.

Despite a myriad of concerns, DE continues to spread. Today's student has multiple options when it comes to selecting providers and programs (Romiszowski, 2005). Facing mounting competition from for-profit enterprises, most established universities now offer DE courses and programs available worldwide including even advanced research (Ph.D.) and professional degrees (e.g., Ed.D. or J.D.). Overwhelmingly, professors at traditional institutions share a belief that college administrators have adopted DE more for "economic reasons than educational purposes" (Navarro, 2000, p. 283). Romiszowski (2005) contends that the greater availability of on-line courses and decreasing costs of technological infrastructures have literally pushed traditional colleges and universities into on-line markets. DE removes most time and place boundaries of the traditional campus and as a result, competition for students intensifies and higher education institutions are incrementally transformed into capitalistic enterprises (Margolis, 2000).

In summary, anti-DE professors believe the concept has been deployed for purely fiscal purposes, most notably, to contend with growing competition and dwindling resources. Consequently, they have come to view on-line courses as being popular only because they generate low-cost student credit hours. They add that DE is only inexpensive when it is done ineffectively (Carr, 2001; Navarro, 2000). Although there are countless opinions on the long-term costs of this instructional approach, most analysts (e.g., Barbera, 2004; Rumble, 1997) concur that it is potentially more expensive than face-to-face instruction. In the context of these convictions, anti-DE professors assert that the process is playing a major role in transforming the modern university into a capitalistic enterprise where students become and get treated as customers.

Value and Effectiveness

Beyond the policymakers and university administrators who have focused on economics, DE is supported by some professors who view the process as beneficial to students and society. For them, on-line courses have the potential of making higher education accessible to many more citizens without necessarily diminishing the quality of instruction. Moreover, they believe that DE actually has philosophical and pedagogical advantages in relation to face-to-face courses (Altbach, 1992). Consider the following examples of positive comments found in the literature:

- Barley (1999) described DE as an effective delivery system capable of responding to rapidly emerging work-related needs in a global economy.
- Lamb and Smith (1999) contended that DE offers learning opportunities for individuals who otherwise would

not attend college, either because they do not have easy access to a campus or because they lack the resources to reside on a campus.

- Sikora (2002) claimed that DE already has played an instrumental role in eradicating normative age standards, and as a result more adults are taking college courses and pursuing degrees.
- Leonard (2001) maintained that DE is especially well suited to meet the needs of many graduate and continuing education students; he pointed to successful partnerships between universities and organizations employing large numbers of professionals (e.g., school districts, hospitals, and accounting firms) to support his contention.
- Lamb (2005) asserted that DE can eliminate a common problem found in many face-to-face courses—a few students dominating classroom discussions while the remaining students remain passive. She maintained that properly designed on-line courses require all students to exchange information with each other and with the instructor.

Favorable comments also have been made in relation to school administration specifically. Professor James Morrison (2005) wrote the following about his personal experience teaching a DE course at the University of North Carolina:

I changed my role as teacher from actor to director and demanded a corresponding transition in student behavior that countered prevailing norms. Several of my colleagues were upset because I deviated from a paradigm that regarded educational administration/leadership as a field of defined knowledge that is taught to students, usually sequentially. My constructivist approach focused on process, not defined knowledge... Therefore, student papers—not my lectures—constituted the "content" of the course. (p. 254)

Skeptics, however, understandably prefer empirical evidence over testimonials. Fortunately, a considerable volume of DE research has been conducted since 1980 (Reeves, 2005), much of it comparing on-line with face-to-face courses. Overall, individuals who have examined these studies have accepted the premise that there are no significant differences between outcomes produced by the two approaches (Tucker, 2001). This judgment, though, is based almost entirely on meta-analyses of studies that focused entirely or primarily on student test scores (Zhao, Lei, Chun Lai, & Tan, 2005). Other studies (e.g., Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004; McIsaac & Gunawardena, 1996) examining qualitative dimensions of DE have produced less favorable outcomes. For example, such studies have found that quality, rigor, and timing vary more in DE than in face-to-face classes (Zhao et al., 2005). The following are examples of more specific problems:

- Failing to provide adequate institutional preparation. Pressures to move to DE usually have been great and therefore, some institutions began offering courses with only minimal preparation (McArthur, Parker, & Giersch, 2003). As an example, courses often were developed and

delivered in the absence of a vision and strategic plan (McLean, 2005). Moreover, some instructors averse to change were required to teach on-line and the fact that they refused to adjust their teaching was basically ignored by university officials (Anderson & Middleton, 2002). As a consequence, students affected were unfairly subjected to trial and error experiments masquerading as legitimate courses (Schrum, 2000).

- Failing to establish an appropriate organizational/administrative structure. The effective deployment of DE often has been hampered by issues such as ineffective or insufficient policy and regulations, authority ambiguity, and a lack of effective leadership and management. Jurisdictional disputes between DE administrators and department chairs, for example, have been relatively common. Such problems have contributed to perceptions among regular faculty that teaching on-line is a precarious assignment (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005).
- Failing to recognize and reward DE instructors. Symbolically, recognition and monetary rewards are manifestations of institutional culture (Kowalski, 2006b). Consequently, faculty members typically separate behaviors and choices that are valued from those that are not. Professors teaching on-line often have not received special credit toward promotion and tenure (Lee, 2002), monetary supplements to compensate for the additional planning time required (Schifter, 2000), and fiscal incentives to compensate for the risk and uncertainty inherent in this assignment (Maguire, 2005).
- Excluding regular faculty from being involved in planning and management decisions. Administrators at some colleges and universities have used a “top-down” approach to implement DE courses (Yang & Cornelious, 2005). Such a political-coercive strategy has produced resentment and overt faculty opposition (Kowalski, 2006b).
- Creating curricular restrictions. Faculty often must make content concessions when teaching on-line courses, either because of infrastructure limitations or because of efficiency measures. As a result, they feel that their academic freedom is being limited (Dahl, 2004; Navarro, 2000).
- Assigning classes primarily to part-time faculty. A significant portion of DE courses have not been taught by tenured faculty or even full-time faculty (Goode, 2004). In part, reliance on part-time instructors is explained by three issues. First, preparing to teach DE courses takes much more time than preparing for a face-to-face course (Lorenzetti, 2004), a factor prompting many regular faculty to avoid these assignments. Second, DE courses are often scheduled and controlled by continuing education divisions (Husmann & Miller, 1999), units accustomed to employing part-time instructors (Yang & Cornelious, 2005). Third, the low cost of part-time instructors accommodates the objective of improving fiscal efficiency (Kowalski, 2006a).
- Failing to provide sufficient technical support. Both instructors and students inevitably encounter technical problems in on-line courses. This fact has been ignored at some institutions and as a result, too little or ineffective support has been provided (Rittschof & Griffin, 2003). Insufficient technical support has dissuaded some professors from accepting DE assignments (Olcott & Wright, 1995).
- Failing to assess student progress. Unfortunately, student grades in many DE courses were determined largely on the basis of procedural participation (Hamilton, Dahlgren, Hult, Roos, & Soderstrom, 2004). In part, this decision reflects a conviction that cheating in on-line courses is easy (Kennedy, Nowak, Raghuraman, Thomas, & Davis, 2000). Therefore, tests and term papers, the two most common tools for grading student learning (Menges & Austin, 2001) have been used less frequently on-line than in face-to-face courses. Overall, negative stereotypes about the academic integrity of DE courses abound (Baron & Crooks, 2005).
- Failing to provide legal clarity. A variety of legal issues, such as copyright, intellectual property, and responsibility for course content, emerge in relation to DE (Throne, 2000). Left unresolved, these issues either encourage instructors to avoid on-line teaching or they diminish curricular quality (Alger, 2002).

Fulfilling the Promise

At least for the foreseeable future, the challenge for educational administration faculty is ensuring that DE courses are deployed effectively. To meet this objective, every faculty member, including part-time instructors, should engage in discourse about the philosophical, curricular, and instructional issues generated by on-line courses. This dialogue should be framed not only by known problems but also by best practices. In this vein, the following initiatives provide a foundation for pursuing DE appropriately.

Creating a Culture of Introspection, Flexibility, and Excellence

Much of the resistance to deploying DE courses has been nested in the assumption that traditional programs have and continue to prepare practitioners effectively. This conviction has provided DE opponents a convenient but inaccurate rationale for resisting change (Kowalski, 2004). In truth, the quality of professional preparation varies markedly across the more than 500 institutions providing graduate courses in school administration, a fact that has been addressed by many educational administration scholars since the mid-1980s (Murphy, 2002).

In more than a few departments of educational administration, faculty members have viewed reforms as an unpleasant distraction that uncontrollably waxes and wanes (Kowalski, 2004). Guided by this assumption, they have

treated DE as another in a long line of ill-conceived ideas that will eventually be discontinued. A healthy foundation for developing on-line instruction is more likely to occur in a climate that sees change as essential—that is, an intellectual environment where faculty objectively evaluate the status quo and then discuss and evaluate their shared commitment to excellence and organizational development (Berquist, 1992).

Creating or Modifying a Shared DE Vision

In the absence of a shared vision, economic motives are likely to be the sole or primary determinant of staffing and delivery decisions. A clear and attainable portrait of the future broadens criteria for curricular and instructional decisions (Drabier, 2003; Ruben, 2004). Vision is especially crucial for on-line teaching because regular faculty question the extent to which this instructional paradigm is based entirely on political and economic motives (Hache, 2000; Moore, 1994). Ideally, a departmental vision should be an extension of a school or college vision which is an extension of a university vision. The statement should articulate not only a desired state at some point in the future but also philosophical and pedagogical ideals linking on-line teaching to excellence.

Creating or Modifying a Strategic Plan

Problems that developed in relation to DE often lingered because they were not identified and analyzed in relation to society's needs, student needs, and departmental goals. Strategic planning is a procedure that can correct this error and provide a structured strategy for achieving the department's mission and vision. The quantity and quality of on-line teaching needs to be examined periodically if not continuously because internal or external developments occur after the vision statement is written and they may require revisions to the vision (Kohrman & Trinkle, 2003). For example, an institution may broaden its technological capabilities making it possible for an educational administration department to offer a broader variety of on-line courses.

In addition, strategic planning and policy development should be intertwined (Gellman-Danley & Fetzner, 1998) because both functions are integral to shaping specific programming goals (Sachs, 2004). Ideally, faculty should have the benefit of being guided by University and College of Education policy on DE (Schauer, Rockwell, Fritz, & Marx, 2005) but apparently, this advantage has not existed across school administration programs.

Ensuring Institutional Commitment

Three approaches have been used to offer online courses. The first is to allow individual professors to experiment by providing them access to whatever instructional technology assistance that may already exist in the university. The second is to allow selected departments to pursue this initiative by adding an instructional developer to assist faculty. The third is to pursue DE as an institutional initiative by creating an infrastructure and separate unit for developing and managing online courses. The last option is undeniably the most expen-

sive and conflict-laden. It requires considerable investments in human and material resources and it depends on university-wide acceptance. As previously described, philosophical and political resistance almost always emerges when professors oppose DE or when they want the institution's scarce resources to be used for different purposes (Duin, Poley, Baer, Langer, & Pickett, 2002).

Pursuing DE as an institutional initiative is difficult but it has proven to be the most effective option. In large measure this is because the other two options rarely muster sufficient political and economic support essential for developing and delivering highly effective on-line course (Sachs, 2004).

Involving Regular Faculty in Critical Decisions

Far too often, DE has been a top-down initiative—a strategy that has at least encouraged faculty resistance. Studies of successful on-line learning reveal that faculty involvement in key decisions is crucial (Maguire, 2005; Sachs, 2004). And this is true both at the initial and subsequent deployment stages. As institutional initiatives mature, the need for conceptualization, application, and evaluation become more important than technological applications (Beaudoin, 2003); therefore, professors need to play a central role in guiding course content and pedagogy. In addition, faculty participation serves a political purpose by creating a sense of ownership for decision participants (Hanson, 2003).

Ensuring Process Flexibility

Rigidity can cause many problems in on-line teaching including faculty dissatisfaction. Describing this problem, Schrum (2000) noted that research with online MBA programs revealed that professors “had significant concerns about the pedagogical rigor left in their courses after modifications for online delivery had been mandated” (p. 44). In large measure, rigidity results from the goal of making all on-line courses uniform. This objective is driven by efficiency (i.e., the time and cost of course design is diminished by forcing all professors to adhere to a predetermined format) and by the treatment of students as customers (i.e., there is an assumed comfort level for students when all DE classes adhere to a single instructional format). If DE limits academic freedom, faculty resistance usually intensifies and instructional effectiveness is diminished.

Preparing Faculty to Teach On-line

Often instructors, and especially adjunct faculty, have been assigned to teach on-line courses with minimal knowledge of this instructional approach. As a result, they typically transpose face-to-face courses into a digital format—a design decision that has proven to be ineffective (Weigel, 2000). To avert this problem, policy should address both curricular and technological preparation. The former deals with adaptations of course content to on-line teaching; the latter deals with managing the instructional delivery systems. At a minimum, instructors should be required to engage in planning with curriculum and technology consultants before teaching DE courses (Goode, 2004).

Providing Adequate Technical and Financial Support

Technical problems with on-line courses are inevitable. Although many universities have computer “help desks,” these operations may not provide timely assistance to either instructors or students. Moreover, support systems can become outdated quickly if they are not improved continuously (Rittschof & Griffin, 2003). The lack of technical support is most likely to occur at universities where DE is treated as an individual or department initiative. As an example, a university shut down its computer networks one weekend every month to conduct updates and improvements. Officials responsible for this decision totally ignored the fact that four of the university’s departments offered on-line courses and that these courses had scheduled weekend activities (e.g., deadlines for submitting modular assignments).

Equally important, DE instructors require financial support. Resources are especially important in two areas: financial incentives for regular faculty to participate in DE (e.g., course development stipends) and financial support for acquiring essential materials and copyright permissions (Keaster, 2005).

Ensuring Student Assessment and Academic Honesty

The credibility of on-line courses has been damaged by the absence of provisions requiring rigor in student assessment and the prevention of academic dishonesty. Deficiencies in these areas are grounded in two myopic beliefs about DE: direct assessment is impractical and cheating is inevitable (Lorenzetti, 2004). As a result, some instructors have graded students primarily on the basis of how often they participate (e.g., how many times they access the course homepage or how many times they post and read messages). This practice has contributed to the popular perception that on-line courses are less rigorous than face-to-face courses. Both policy and support mechanisms for dealing with direct assessment and cheating are absolutely necessary. The expectation that higher cognitive processes (e.g., application and analysis of knowledge) are assessed should be no less in DE than in any other form of instruction (Oosterhof, 1994).

Promulgating Policy on Intellectual Property and Copyright

Intellectual property and copyright can be gnarly problems for university administrators. As an example, a professor may develop videos, PowerPoint presentations, and other original material for his or her course. Is the university at liberty to allow another professor to teach the same course using the same material? Some university officials have attempted to evade this difficult question by adopting a “cookie cutter” approach to on-line teaching. That is, experts are retained to design courses and in exchange for compensation, the intellectual rights are legally transferred to the university. Then less expensive part-time instructors are employed to deliver the courses, functioning basically as tutors (Schrum, 2000). In addition to providing a questionable form of instruction,

this approach discourages regular faculty from teaching on-line courses because they are not rewarded for the ideas and materials they develop.

Equally noteworthy, possible advantages of on-line teaching may be ignored simply because instructors are fearful of copyright violations. As an example, DE offers greater opportunities than face-to-face classes to integrate video and audio presentations. Instructors, including highly-experienced professors, require assistance with copyright issues—and this entails more than warning professors not to violate the law. Intellectual property and copyright policies should encourage not discourage professors to teach DE courses and they should be written to protect the institution, instructors, and maintain academic freedom. (Gasaway, 2002).

Rewarding Professors for Developing and Teaching DE Courses

In the political context of academe, the value of any activity is weighed in relation to promotion and tenure. Thus, efforts to engage regular faculty in DE are enhanced when online teaching is recognized and rewarded in relation to these two employment variables (Rittschof & Griffin, 2003; Schrum, 2000). Moreover, establishing a reward for online teaching—one comparable to traditional scholarship, teaching, and service awards—is symbolically important.

Final Thoughts

Regrettably, the decision to use DE to deliver pre-service and in-service school administration courses at most institutions has been nested in pragmatic political and economic challenges. For many would-be reformers, on-line education is an inferior approach, not because it lacks potential but rather because it has been exploited. There are already more than 500 institutions offering school administration courses and arguably over half of them lack adequate faculty and material resources to deliver quality programs. Each year, the number of new programs grows largely for the following reasons:

- There are no national curricula for preparing principals and superintendents (Kowalski, 2006a) and thus, institutions have considerable freedom to design their own programs.
- State licensing does not protect school administration profession to the extent that it protects more established professions. Standards vary markedly across states and a growing number of states have eliminated or weakened licensing requirements (Feistritzer, 2003). As a result, entrepreneurial and low-quality programs have been allowed to operate—a development that deepens concerns about the professional stature of school administration.
- The myopic belief that there is a critical shortage of practitioners has prompted policymakers in many states to encourage new programs (Kowalski & Sweetland, 2005), especially innovative ventures that promise to deliver instruction at below average costs.

Clearly, DE is a two-edged sword for educational administration. On the one hand, it can help to ensure that preparation programs and continuing education are adequate and available to all who need them. On the other hand, it can accelerate negative trends that already threaten the future of school administration as a profession. The ultimate effect of DE depends on professors, including those who do not teach on-line. If they elect to remain on the high ground where they can complain and criticize without getting their feet wet, then the continuing downward spiral described previously seems inevitable. If instead they bravely wade into the murky water and engage university administrators and colleagues in meaningful discourse, they demonstrate that rigor and relevance are no less important and no less possible for this medium than they are for face-to-face classes.

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