THE FLEX DOC: CHANGING THE INSTRUCTIONAL DELIVERY PARADIGM

The Flex Doc: Changing the Instructional Delivery Paradigm

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Abstract

For nearly a century this university has been training teachers and administrators for public schools. The university has benefited from a rich heritage, which includes being the first teachers college in Mississippi. Having established itself as the state's primary institution for the training of teachers it would be easy to rest on past laurels and relationships forged long ago. However, a group of professors sought to embark on a bold new initiative that would re-examine the role and relevancy of the educational administration program in today's ever-changing society. Working in conjunction with area school superintendents, students, alumni, and faculty, professors sought to identify the future needs of its graduate students. An initial meeting with area school superintendents and alumni yielded information that would lead to a flexible but rigorous terminal degree program that would redefine the existing strategy for instructional delivery. The professors' empathetic, collaborative and innovative process served as a catalyst for change. Honest inquiry provided genuine feedback from the professional education community. Participants appreciated the approach by which professors identified, understood, and engaged stakeholders. New insights resulted in a collaborative process, where faculty began to re-think program delivery and effectiveness. Reframing brought about a process for innovative change, which resulted in the Flex-Doc program.

Background

As the world gets smaller in the age of increasing technology, it is incumbent on those in the business of education to adapt or perish. With this thinking in mind, one department of educational leadership decided to give a pilot run to an innovative delivery design entitled the Flex-Doc. Flex-Doc is simply an abbreviation for flexible doctorate.

In our department, we continued to hear the requests of students for scheduling that was more flexible than the traditional weeknight format. Many of our constituency were practicing school administrators and found it close to impossible to meet the demands of K-12 school administration with the traditional format. Consequently, either they were not seeking advanced degrees, or were looking to on-line venues to fill their needs. To further drive home the point, many of the students within our graduate programs had begun to share some concerns with our department faculty.

We take pride in the fact that we work to be a customer service-oriented department in many aspects. This belief supported by Snipes, Oswald and Hortman in their 1997 article on student satisfaction in higher education, stating that with our increasingly changing market, the survivors will be those who are more concerned with customer satisfaction.

Repeatedly, we were hearing student's requests for us to re-evaluate our program requirements and we knew had to take note. Not only were new delivery concerns an issue, but students were also suggesting we evaluate our entire program requirements.

We determined to investigate the idea of scheduling first, as it seemed quite obvious as a need and the concern that would be quite easy to implement.   However, as Evans and Franz (1997) note, universities have changed little in organization and structure since their emergence

in modern form and they mightily resist reform efforts. Realizing this statement to be quite true, we determined that prior to creating change, we would organize to involve local constituency, review best practice and then get busy putting the "flex" into the program if indeed it was warranted.

Implementing the Plan

As we began dialogue in regard to how to best meet the needs of our students, we knew we had to set some parameters. We certainly did not want to be granting degrees to students that we had not had an opportunity to work with face-to-face. We also knew that in order to stay competitive in a technologically driven marketplace that we were going to have to accommodate students with some aspects of on-line convenience and flexible scheduling. There was concern among faculty that we not sacrifice our identity, values, and mission in an attempt to lure students. There was a mental image being constructed in our minds but it lacked a certain clarity and definition. We determined that prior to setting parameters, we should convene a meeting of interested parties to initiate a dialogue.

A date was set and a representative sample of those we thought might be interested in the new concept were invited to an informal gathering. This group included area superintendents, principals, alumni, and current students. Probing school culture begins with an assessment of meaning…properly understanding the meaning people ascribe to various events and initiatives (Rentsch, 1990). We discussed the basic concepts we had discussed and requested their input. Honest inquiry on our part brought genuine feedback. Before commenting on our ideas, the culture [superintendents, principals, alumni and students] were forthright in communicating what they perceived to be shortcomings and miscues in the educational administration program in

years past. Their comments were not anticipated and caused some tenseness but in hindsight they were critical for us to understand. Reframing issues allowed us to gaining new and multiple perspectives from the very community we are striving to serve. Gaining a fuller understanding of how we are perceived was important so new program initiates could be built with trust and understanding. We became astute and empathetic listeners to all that was shared, meticulously taking notes and welcoming further comments.

They overwhelming supported the idea of flexible scheduling. One of the options they wanted to see implemented was the offering of Saturday sessions. We learned that many individuals were simply unable to take a course Monday through Friday due to supervisory duties on campus. The simple construct of Saturday classes flourished from the start.

Another appealing option was on-line classes. There was discussion about educational professionals in the field who started but never finished their terminal degree program. Could the university waive time restrictions to have these individuals return and pursue their degrees after a lengthy absence? The term "flexible" began defining itself as participants elaborated on weekend classes, Saturday only formats, one-week classes, and the development of more online classes.

Another major concern, especially from the superintendents in the group, was the dwindling pool of qualified applicants for administrative positions. This particular subset of superintendents is in a region of the state where there will be an impending vacuum of administrators due to retirement. As is widely known, the demand nationwide for K-12 administrators is growing faster than all other occupations (U.S. Department of Labor, 2004). Hence, a more pressing need than ever to alter traditional means of classroom delivery. The general sentiment was that flexible formats might provide more candidates for these administrative positions. Though mixed there was support for the practice of cohorting.

The Parameters

The next step in the process would be to take the feedback from the meeting, study best practices, and consider practicality for our department. We knew from the meeting that Saturday classes would be successful, as well as on-line sections. We knew from research that cohorting builds stronger and more successful administrators. Reynolds and Hebert (1998) identified factors such as self-perception, values and disposition, as favorable derivatives of the cohort process. However, it was determined that cohorting would not be feasible in a pilot program. We also had a sense that we did not want students in the program that we did not work with, as least at some point, in a more traditional fashion. It was paramount in our estimation to seek opportunities to provide a meaningful leadership preparation experience that connects theory and practice (Lashway, 2003).   It was at this point that we decided to require students to come full-time to campus during the summer semesters. As for the long semesters (both fall and spring), we would try a variety of flexible options for students.

The first option (that we had already been practicing, to some extent) was to make available one on-line class per semester. Next, we decided to add Saturday offerings. Assuming that students would not want to meet every Saturday of a semester, we worked to create a more compact term on Saturdays. Rather than the traditional 2-3 hour meetings, for an entire semester, we would meet for full days for 5 or 6 Saturdays. Since most of our students were determined to take two or more classes per semester, we scheduled two Saturday classes and one on-line section per semester. We also continued to offer classes in the traditional format.

Best Practices

Instructional formats, technology, and delivery systems brought the challenge of change to our doorstep. We recognize best practices as a well-defined methodology that, through experience and research, has produced a desired result. Our research has led us to Saturday class offerings and online classes each semester. Throughout our process we developed a heightened sense of empathy as we contemplated the needs of our non-traditional students. "When all is said and done, what matters most for students' learning are the commitments and capacities of their teachers" (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p.293).

It was within the context of collaboration, professionalism, and commitment that we sought to examine best practices that constitute excellence in graduate teaching. The Higher Learning Commission (2002 Introduction) stated, "While endeavoring to maintain balance and flexibility in the evaluation of new forms of delivery, [we] are resolved to sustain certain values, These include, among other things: that education is best experienced within a community of learning where competent professionals are actively and cooperatively involved with creating, providing, and improving the instructional program." Olcott and Wright (1995) concluded the ultimate responsibility for instructional program quality and oversight, and the efficacy of instructional formats belongs to faculty.

The development of our flex-doc program required a collaborative effort. The creative capital of our educational faculty was tapped. "Many believe collaboration increases productivity, maintains motivation, and stimulates creativity and risk-taking. It can maximize the use of limited resources and can enhance the quality of teaching and research" (Austin and Baldwin, 1992, p.1). Collaboration flourishes when teaches routinely function as teams rather than individuals. Katzenbach and Smith (199) noted, "A team is a small number of people with

complimentary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable" (p.45).

Robert Kozma (1994) noted that information technology and methodology are part of instructional design, and if properly adapted to the learning environment can be quite productive. Senge (1990) lists three essential qualities to be possessed by leaders of educational organizations. He envisions the leader as designer, steward, and teacher. (Senge et al., 1990) further elaborated on the concept of leader as designer by noting, "the leader's task is designing the learning process" (p.345). We thought it was incumbent upon us to become designers of instructional delivery with a thorough knowledge of the students we teach. "Focusing on student learning turns our thinking about the future of our colleges and universities upside down: from faculty productivity to student productivity, from faculty disciplinary interests to students need to learn, from faculty teaching styles to student learning styles, from classroom teaching to student learning" (Guskin, 1994, p.7).

The need for alternative, cost-effective methods of course production and delivery is a relevant issue. We are seeking to increase our capacity to provide innovative delivery systems within the budgetary constraints of our department. What are the real cost factors in implementing the successful use of weekend instruction, online instruction and threaded-research? If part of a university's mission, then perhaps cost is less a factor since non-traditional students are being reached by these programs. Research suggests that as instructional delivery formats become more efficient, program costs should decrease (Ludlow, 1994).

Obviously, change that brings success helps advance the institution, faculty and students collectively. Declining enrollments have been a primary concern for institutions

of higher learning. Small & Lohrasbi (2003) identified enrollment concerns and the ever

escalating cost of traditional educational delivery as formidable issues. This has caused many

universities to seek new non-traditional students with an accompanying mindset focused on

flexibility, time, and accountability. Essential to the process we were embarking upon was the

core belief that quality would not be compromised at any point. While the enrollment pattern

here has been one of steady growth in recent years, we are striving to position ourselves for the

future. The instructional delivery system under consideration could be innovative but not

impractical, customer-service oriented but not compromising in content, and highly adaptable to

emerging technologies but not complicated. The needs of our non-traditional studentes were

identified as we learned to reframe our thoughts regarding programs and practices.

We view the implementation of best practices as a continuing, life-long professional

challenge. Ideally, we want to be in a perpetual mode of finding potentially useful pathways to

best practices.

Implementation

Prior to the initial implementation of the 'Flex-Doc' we determined to have a meeting of

prospective students. The new 'Flex-Doc' was highly advertised to our local students via word-

of-mouth, advertisements and newsletters. The current program had to its credit about 65

specialist/doctoral students. We were quite surprised then, to have nearly 80 attendees for the

meeting. Interested students traveled from as far as 100 miles away to find out about the new

program. The meeting generated a host of questions, as well as new-found enthusiasm.

Prior to the fall term, we had an unbelievable number of new applicants for the program.

It appeared that the 'flex-doc' would be quite a success. In the fall of 2004, we

offered our first three 'flex-doc' courses. The on-line course had approximately 30 students and the Saturday classes had nearly 20 each.   The spring term for 2005, however, would be the true test of the ability to do many classes in the flexible format. Slated for the spring schedule Saturday classes were two quite challenging courses, School Law and Research and Introduction to Statistics.

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