Leading Leadership Preparation: 21st Century Designs

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Abstract

As political accountability and economic reality increasingly influence higher education, many leadership preparation programs are seeking cost effective instructional delivery systems that yield highly effective results. Simultaneously, large numbers of graduate students are seeking quality leadership preparation programs that provide both learning flexibility and convenience at a reasonable price. Asynchronous online courses provide students with schedule flexibility, decreased travel expenses and decreased travel time commitments. These online courses are particularly attractive to working professionals, students with parental responsibilities and students residing in remote geographic areas. In response to market demand, many leadership preparation programs have turned to hybrid courses, online courses or fully online programs. Coupled with these phenomena are seasoned leadership faculty members who can be thoroughly entrenched in traditional instructional methodologies. The development of a critical mass of faculty with the capacity to overcome the organizational barriers to change is fundamental to the successful integration of online components into leadership preparation programs is. How can leadership preparation programs most effectively integrate online learning activities and enhance program vitality without sacrificing program quality? This paper attempts to provide a partial answer to that question through a synopsis of the research regarding online learning and leadership preparation programs.

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"Our society is changing rapidly, and educators must plan to meet technological needs in education without sacrificing quality" (Coombs-Richardson, 2007, p. 75). Professionals seeking graduate degrees value leadership programs that incorporate the flexibility of learning from their own office or home. Such flexibility saves students time and reduces both the stress and expense associated with lengthy or heavy traffic commutes. According to Underhill (2006), "In an online teaching and learning environment there is enormous potential for cooperative or collaborative work within groups particularly among geographically diverse student populations" (p. 171). Online learning can be both convenient and cost effective. However, the integration of online learning into leadership preparation programs is not without its challenges.

Upon implementing an online leadership preparation at The University of Colorado at Denver, Browne-Ferrigno, Muth, and Choi (2000) found, "Adult learning styles vary tremendously and thus accommodations need to be made so students have ready access to technical assistance in the use of information technology during the early weeks of a new program" (pp. 50-51). In addition to technical difficulties, student performance assessment can be challenging. In a traditional face-to-face instructional delivery system, the instructor can visually monitor students who are not verbally participating in class discussion yet may be mentally engaged and deeply reflecting. Such subjective monitoring of student participation by the instructor is more difficult in an online format. As Browne-Ferrigno et al. wrote, "The fact that a message has been opened does not mean that is was read" (p. 51). New technologies bring new instructional challenges.

How can leadership preparation programs manage these barriers to learning and simultaneously capitalize on the advantages of online learning? Sivan (1997) wrote, "We must admit that currently we lack in our ability to fully analyze the issues of leadership within virtual

communities" (p. 12). However, this does not mean that the advantages of online learning cannot be integrated into leadership preparation programs through the use of blended instructional delivery systems. Such blended instructional delivery systems couple the advantages of face-to-face instruction with the convenience and flexibility of online learning.

Instructional Delivery Systems

Leadership preparation programs planning to integrate online components into traditional face-to-face instructional delivery systems may employ blended, fully online synchronous distance learning or fully online asynchronous learning instructional delivery systems among other emerging technologies. While researching the use of virtual lecture halls, Cramer, Collins, Snider, and Fawcett (2006) found supporting evidence for "…the notion that a particular type of student may be more likely to enroll in an in-class vs. online section of a course, and then uniquely benefit from utilization of this resource" (p. 378). Student learning styles and instructional delivery system preferences may impact learning. While researching fully online and blended learning, Lim, Morris, and Kupritz (2006) found,

> …the two learner groups in online and blended delivery formats didn't show any significant differences in the mean scores for perceived and actual learning and perceived and actual learning retention, while all learners, regardless of the delivery options, indicated a significant increase in perceived and actual learning between [*sic*] before and after the course. (p. 814)

However, the fully online student group in the study reported that they had a heavier work load than those in the blended learning format.

How can leadership development programs retain the human element associated with communication skills while employing an online instructional delivery system? How can that human interaction that is so integral to leadership development be encompassed in an online

instructional environment? Ng (2007) found, "An important issue in online delivery is whether it can provide an interactive learning environment for the participants" (p. 11). In synchronous virtual communications, much of the social presence coupled with interpersonal communication that has typically been associated with face-to-face instruction "…such as tone of voice, hesitation, facial expressions, vocal cues, dress and posture" (Gulsun, 2007, p.3) is retained. However, much of this social presence is lost when employing an asynchronous instructional delivery system.

Despite the loss of social presence, asynchronous learning is not without advantages. Underhill (2006) found, "The time lag built into asynchronous discussions allows for reflective thinking, a sign of a deeper approach to learning, which is the aim of most higher education courses" (p. 171). Coombs-Richardson (2007) found that in an asynchronous learning environment, students "…can compose, edit, and refine their ideas before expressing them to the group" (p. 72). Such opportunities encouraged students who might have been more reluctant to participate in face-to-face instructional settings to actively and effectively participate. While studying asynchronous online discussions, Vonderwell, Liang, and Alderman (2007) found, "…threaded discussions versus non-threaded discussions initiated more in-depth and diverse responses, and helped develop an interactive response pattern" (p. 315). Furthermore, the students in the Vonderwell et al. study revealed a preference for varied assessment measures as opposed to repetitive asynchronous online discussion assessment measures. Such findings are consistent with what we know about varied instructional activities in face-to-face instructional delivery systems.

Other scholars take a different view of asynchronous learning. While examining the social presence aspect of asynchronous learning, Reio and Crim (2006) found:

> In our review of the distance learning, adult education, human resource, communication, and psychological theoretical and empirical literatures related to the facilitation of optimal online learning, it was clear that evidence related to the efficacy of Internet-bases instructional delivery is mixed at best. (p. 964)

The communication time lag associated with asynchronous learning makes collaborative communication activities designed to enhance social interaction skills more challenging. Additionally, the absence of non-verbal communication clues such as tone of voice, body language and rate of speech makes meaning discernment more difficult and increases the barriers associated with effective communication. Asynchronous learning undoubtedly faces communication barriers that are not present in other instructional delivery systems.

Regardless of which online instructional delivery system is utilized, students must be both motivated and responsible. According to Coombs-Richardson (2007), "…online learners must assume greater responsibility for their own learning than students in the traditional classroom setting" (p. 72). Referencing information technology, Shinkareva and Benson (2006) wrote, "…regardless of the students' level of self-directedness, motivation could play a substantial role and could be the major factor in learning IT for an online course" (p. 958).

Faculty Development

"Online teaching and learning is making a significant impact on the fabric of higher education" (Kim et al., 2004, p. 468). According to the Massachusetts Department of Education (2005), the use of technology in both education and training will continue to increase. More specifically, Flowers and Baltzer (2006) reported that the greatest online program penetration rate among American universities was occurring at the master's degree level. Faculty development is one way that leadership preparation programs can shape the impact of online learning and thereby ensure that quality accompanies convenience. According to Gahungu,

Dereshiwsky, and Moan (2006), many faculty members move into online learning environments without being adequately prepared. Professional learning communities with an online learning focus are one way that the developmental gap can be closed.

The development of a learning community culture among higher education faculty is paramount when moving toward online learning environments. Atwell and Maxwell (2007) wrote, "We need to develop shared trust by highlighting individual successes and helping faculty members feel respected, valued, safe, and in the company of worthy peers" (p. 2). Murdock (2006) found that little research has been conducted regarding faculty perceptions and attitudes toward online learning. A collaborative effort built around the input that fosters ownership is imperative if an online initiative is to succeed. According to Goolnik (2006), "Any induction process should allow staff to undertake a learning curve that builds up their confidence and expertise using a blended learning approach incorporating constructivist principles" (p. 15). Ongoing professional development should incorporate a scaffolding technique that begins with traditional instructional delivery techniques and moves toward other delivery modes such as blended, synchronous and asynchronous learning environments.

Providing faculty with the tools to efficiently create and publish online learning materials is an important part of the instructional delivery system transformation process. Cacheiro, Rodrigo, Laherran, and Olmo (2006) found that design templates were valuable tools when designing virtual courses. The design templates offered a methodology that helped organize learning activities. Researching online learning, Lim et al. (2006) wrote, "…findings suggest that it becomes an important consideration to embed instructional activities and collaboration opportunities enhancing learners' emotional engagement with peers and instructors in designing online or blended instruction" (p. 815). Such activities embedded into the instructional design templates facilitate behaviors that can lead to both instructor and student success.

Amrein-Beardsley, Foulger, and Toth (2007) suggested that instructors should gradually incorporate online instruction initially and then build and expand online components in future semesters. Online lectures and audio clips can serve to supplement rather than supplant required readings. Such technology enhanced lessons can serve as a first step in the professional development process. Once faculty members have experienced success and observed the value first hand, many are ready to move to slightly more advanced technology based instructional delivery systems. Cramer et al. (2006) improved online instructional delivery by converting "…narrated PowerPoint lectures to much smaller and more feasibly downloaded Shockwave movies" (p. 378).

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