

Systematic considerations in online education administration in a rapidly changing era

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Introduction

If you have experience in distance higher education, you're likely aware of the various phases of growth and expansion the industry has undergone and the unique way in which this has globally impacted the existing online educational model. This has influenced the areas of accessibility, affordability, growth and scalability, pedagogy, design, development, and delivery. On one hand, it's making education flexible, inclusive, and equitable to meet students' needs with high-quality technology, telecommunication, and high-quality learning management systems that have specifically allowed media-rich content to be delivered remotely. On the other hand, it has posed many challenges caused by internal and external forces, such as the digital divide between the rural and urban student populations, high attrition rates, and lack of social, economic, and academic support in online learning. The impact of technological advances and global competition has created a new agenda for higher education to ensure that all students can succeed in a complex and rapidly changing technological world. However, online education administrators cannot comfortably say that we have sufficient resources to assist with this transformation.

This global transformation is influencing not only the instructors', students', and administrators' thinking, but also have allowed parents, academic leaders, politicians (policymakers), and other educational communities to learn about new policies, procedures, best practices, and other nuances that make online education successful. As we think about growing and scaling online programs, it has become difficult *not* to notice how online learning has become a part of mainstream education. And continuing to cling to the brick-and-mortar model, without considering how to provide the same or similar resources to online students, would be to our disadvantage. All stakeholders and constituencies, within an institution or outside an

institution, responsible for making decisions about policies, procedures, personnel, infrastructure, adoption of technology, training, and curriculum development need to work hand-in-hand to create structures of support, build relationships, assist each other in understanding the implications that these new models of teaching and learning have on both traditional and non-traditional students. This article will share some effective and innovative strategies and practices for online education that can address diverse institutional needs while growing, managing, and maintaining quality online programs.

New Model of Online Higher Education

It is essential to acknowledge that technological availability has lessened the gaps in learning opportunities, providing institutions a way to break the boundaries of geographical locations and/or conventional definitions of education. Therefore, it is important that institutions leverage technology to fill the gaps in areas of growth, management, and maintenance. Most institutions use technology in all of these above areas; however, to create a bridge between urban and rural education systems, community colleges and universities, and/or across nations, we must learn to use it strategically. In regard to growth, it'd be beneficial to perform a needs analysis from the students' and communities' perspectives to find out what programs may be suitable for the university and what is the status of the existing online programs. Institutions should also analyze the return on investment from each of these programs, how institutions can maximize their given resources, and in which areas there is scope for growth. As a growing institution, we should create a synergy between institutions in the area to build partnerships, pathways, articulations, and shared curriculum development opportunities that will benefit all institutions and help us move towards a common goal.

Growth of online programs

As we evaluate the diverse nature of institutions engaging in online education and what institutions are doing to be inclusive of their students' needs, it's interesting to see what models have been implemented to enhance the growth of online education. Higher education institutions everywhere are experiencing issues caused by healthy competition among different colleges and universities in their areas, environmental calamities worldwide, and governmental policies. To enhance learning, grow enrollment, and improve course quality for their students, institutions could establish collaborative partnerships with community colleges that enable students to take courses concurrently at the universities. Dual enrollment program agreements with different school districts could offer students opportunities to earn early college credits at a discounted rate. The institutions should work with state legislatures to make sure that their state schools are funded for these initiatives, and work with high school counselors to promote college-level courses that would position students for early degree completion. Institutions have also started to initiate incentive programs for faculty to incorporate open educational resources (OER) in general education core courses offered during the first two years of college to promote affordability, accessibility, and success. Some institutions are building collaborative programs with governmental organizations, industries, and corporations to offer discounted prices for their employees to enroll in undergraduate and graduate programs. Providing these online continuing education certifications helps industry workers to develop workforce skills that will enhance their performance and chances of promotion in their respective industries. The strategies and practices discussed and shared here reflect the critical trends in higher education, which can be transferred to address the diverse needs at various institutional levels. This trend will also

address the larger question of how to cope with the digital divide between rural, urban, and disadvantaged communities and oversee programs.

Management and Maintenance of online programs

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to assess the management of online programs and adopt some innovative practices of distance instruction to fulfill the needs of schools, colleges, and universities, causing a lot of dissatisfaction amongst both traditional educators and learners. However, distance education researchers predict that these methods will prove efficient in taking us through the next wave of higher education, where distance education will be considered equal to or better than the traditional way of education. The way that these online programs are managed will bring about a major shift in the field of education and will become a part of mainstream education in the near future. Accordingly, some news articles in higher education such as, “President Speaks: Stop asking whether online learning is worth it...,” are quite relevant for the times (Kilburn, 2022).

Some are even wondering if distance education is going through its fourth era of industrial revolution and if higher education is going through some radical changes politically, socially, and economically. The quicker we acknowledge the different kinds of forces—namely, global, institutional, and personal forces (Mellieon. et.al., 2014)—that are influencing and changing our educational ecosystem, the quicker we can adapt and accept online education as our new normal; and the better we will be able to serve our clients, the students. The ongoing global pandemic is one such external global force; however, even before COVID-19 hit, there were many such global forces that were considered disruptive. Everyday headlines like “inflation is coming to college campuses,” (Marcus, 2022) “Corporatized education and state sovereignty,” (Lundie et al., 2022) and “Can alternate reality courses help entrepreneurs succeed” (Mollick,

2022) also indicate that the external forces are playing havoc over the educational ecosystem. To cope with such forces and still meet the management and maintenance needs of the institution is a challenge faced by online program managers.

The onus of managing and maintaining quality online programs falls on faculty, instructional design staff, IT personnel, institutional leaders, and other stakeholders at the institution. While developing distance education programs, the focus of academic leaders should be on preparing students to take control of their own learning and giving them the opportunity to become creators and collaborators with a global audience and not just the completion of a curriculum or acquiring a degree.

We, as faculty/instructors, can comfortably say that we have many resources to assist us in the rapidly changing technological world where students are far savvier with technology than the previous generations. They are more inspired, better informed, connected, and open to learning and designing their own pathways that will be more applicable and help propagate them into the future. Many of them still need higher degrees of awareness on academic integrity, time management, collaboration skills, and discipline to navigate the complex learning systems. Therefore, the role of faculty and instructors has changed from “sage on the stage” to a content curator who guides the student from the sidelines and shows them how to apply the content in the real world.

Over the different generations of distance education, various offering models have been implemented and online administrators in higher education have weighed the pros and cons of each. Previously implemented models were only as advanced as available technologies could allow, which significantly impacted online pedagogy, course offering, and student engagement. Educational technology businesses are working hard to create options aligning technology with

different pedagogy styles. Providing a balance between the online and traditional models of instruction and understanding of andragogical vs. heutagogical enable faculty to create new kinds of instructional resources, as well as new ways of delivering instruction and accommodating the diverse needs of 21st century learners.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, some institutions applied context-specific strategies to deliver their courses, such as the hyflex model. The hyflex model includes five different approaches, each with special pedagogical considerations, such as synchronous simulcast, blended learning, tutorials, asynchronous learning, and unit groups. Each model had its advantages and disadvantages; however, many institutions found it difficult to quickly adapt these models, as they require infrastructure rearrangements, training of faculty and staff, and acquiring technology in a timely manner.

The maintenance of new or existing programs depends on continuous quality improvement, which influences the learning experience, satisfaction of students, and, ultimately, online program retention. If students are satisfied with their experiences (both academic and student support), and if the institution has resources in place to cater to online students' needs, then we can deem the institution successful in providing online students with the necessary support. We also need to keep in mind why students take online classes, which is mostly because of reduced cost of tuition, convenience, availability of programs, or to maintain a work–life balance. Therefore, continuous self-analysis to evaluate how to provide such opportunities for students is needed.

Challenges often faced by online administrators

Due to recent technological growths, administrators have had to face several challenges created by the internal and external forces of changes associated with this evolutionary process

and adapt to make education flexible, inclusive, affordable, and equitable to address students' needs and keep up with the competition. The question is what these challenges are and whether they should be considered deficits or opportunities to provide quality online education. The leadership challenges and opportunities while accommodating these forces of change are at various levels of online teaching and learning, and they are enormous. A challenge often faced by online administrators is how to increase enrollment in their institutions and whether online courses should be offered as an option to increase enrollment; as compared to the dilemma of providing online course offerings in hopes of reaching out to students in rural areas, which would help close the digital divide by providing strong technology infrastructure and emerge as a globally-oriented learning ecosystem.

In order to overcome the growing challenges posed by the different forces affecting teaching models, learning models, and changes in pedagogy and technology, administrators are looking for different incentives for faculty and staff. Because of the striking differences between, traditional, online, hybrid, and hyflex modes of learning, the institutions are trying to provide on-time training programs that will help instructors overcome the struggle of the ongoing needs to learn the emerging technology and the skills required to provide equitable experience to students mirroring a traditional setting.

As institutional leaders perform internal self-evaluations, it is important to assess the potential areas of growth, the culture of the institution, plan for building or improving infrastructure, training and development, technology, and human personnel. It is pertinent that institutions address challenges including faculty development and preparation, student learning environments, curricular change, student services, and a broad array of policy changes.

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