Chapter 18  
Positioning the Learning Organization for a Successful Distance Education Strategy

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ABSTRACT

Compared to traditional educational offerings, Distance Education requires a significantly different business model involving factors such as learning culture, target audience, infrastructure, course and content development, support models, and others. The following perspective is put forth in an effort to illustrate particular concerns that may affect internal operations, perceptions, and attitudes as well as external reception and market positioning of distance education offerings. Recommendations and solutions will be discussed that center around organizational systemic anchoring and faculty development as a critical success factor. All of these pieces will help to provide a framework that could be utilized in building a successful, and more importantly, sustainable distance education strategy and associated process. Emerging developments in the realm of distance education will be presented and provide an outlook of how this educational field may change and evolve in the near future.

INTRODUCTION

Planning, developing, and launching a Distance Education program is a large undertaking that when done well, can launch your organization into a new realm of possibilities. Strategy is the heart of any successful distance education implementation and it should always be anchored and aligned with the overall mission of the university or college. A Distance Education strategy is a subset of the overall strategic direction the organization is venturing towards and should seamlessly support the guiding principles and goals of an organization.

The Distance Education strategy is an elaborate and systematic plan of action and must include a thoughtful vision that considers the institutional culture, organizational and faculty development. It involves everyone within the organization, requires stepping back from the daily routine and taking a
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higher-level view of the mission and goals and best ways to implement them.

It is easy to equate Distance Education with technology but failure to consider all of the other factors that make up a successful implementation strategy is dangerous. Determination of what Distance Education means to an individual organization is a key consideration. “True learning organizations aren’t those with the most courses; they are characterized by the broader culture of open knowledge exchange” (Rosenberg, 2008, p. 25). Thinking about the culture of an organization allows the identification of potential roadblocks and addresses them proactively.

To position an organization for a successful Distance Education strategy, considering an assessment of environmental and internal factors as a means to better understand the Higher Education landscape in general and the individual institution in particular will help to formulate a sound framework. Conducting an environmental scan will reveal existing programs, the potential for new developments, and niche markets for Distance Education. The internal scan evaluates technology needs, course and content development, and campus support.

Recommendations for the strategy development process are derived from organizational development practice. Because faculty development is one of the critical aspects in establishing Distance Education programs, it is singled out and reflected upon separately. A closer look at organizational development should identify key stakeholders, support structures, and the evaluation process while striving to build a governance structure with strong internal and external collaborations. Faculty development should examine teaching strategies for online courses, implementation of learning technologies, and effective technology integration. Getting faculty ready to teach in an online environment provides a great opportunity to bring supporting departments, such as the library and counseling services, into the conversation and encourage collaborations across the organization.

While each aspect, technology, content, assessment, and support structures could be considered separately, a strategic plan will link all these individual pieces of an organization together, orchestrating the process, providing guiding principles and a vision, helping people see the bigger picture and achieve step-by-step goals that are measurable within the strategy. A strategic plan is the roadmap – not set in stone, flexible enough for adjustments, but still a refined roadmap that supports sustainable decision-making and goal-oriented movement.

BACKGROUND

Considering Distance Education

The Distance Education market is very diverse ranging from individual course offerings to certificates, undergraduate and graduate degree programs for the adult and/or non-traditional learners. Non-profit organizations are the logical source for such offerings; however, there has been a significant growth in recent years within the for-profit sector. Online universities, providers of learning portals and learning management systems are on the rise. Publishers repackage their contents to develop learning applications that are sometimes sold separately as a standalone learning solution or frequently in combination with textbooks.

Although much movement is noticeable in the Distance Education sector, not all universities and colleges have branched out into the virtual learning market as Distance Education still struggles with acceptance problems and is critically monitored for a variety of reasons (Oblinger & Hawkins, 2005). “Given the tremendous knowledge base already existent in their communities, higher education institutions have a significant advantage in