
Roles of Administrators in Ensuring the Quality of Online Programs

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Abstract: Roles of administrators are often overlooked when discussing the quality of online education. Administrators have long assumed the pivotal influence on school policies, faculty morale, and learning atmosphere. This paper will examine the challenges administrators face and their new roles of quality assurance for online education. Recommendations will also be made for improving the quality and success of online programs.

Keywords: Online Programs, Administrators, Quality.

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1. Introduction

With the prevalence of online learning, online programs are rapidly expanding. Higher education administrators are facing the challenges of increasing student enrollments, growing global opportunities, implementing new technologies, responding to workplace demands, and at the same time, maintaining affordability. Yet how to ensure the quality of online programs has been a major concern for educators and policy makers. It is common to hear arguments that technology has been used as a panacea to correct financial problems of institutions rather than a valid teaching method (Hensrud, 2001). Online course delivery is often viewed by “administrators as a ‘cash cow’ venue” (Brown & Green, 2003, p. 148). Administrators should realize that when the quality of online education declines, the online programs will no longer be a “cash cow” venue. However, most of the administrators are not aware of the impact they have on creating a positive culture and changes in online programs (Dooley & Murphrey, 2000; Robinson, 2000). Therefore, it is crucial for administrators to realize the roles they play in ensuring the quality of online programs.

It is necessary to define quality when discussing it in relation to online programs. The American Society for Quality (2009) identifies four dimensions of quality in education: accountability, curricular alignment, assessment, and student satisfaction. Bourne and Moore (2004) suggested four elements of quality online education. They are student satisfaction and student success, learning effectiveness, blended environments, and assessment. Frydenberg (2002) identified nine quality standards in e-learning. The first and foremost standard is executive commitment. Others include technological infrastructure, student services, design and development, instruction and instructor services, program delivery, financial health, legal and regulatory requirements, and program evaluation. However defined, all of these quality dimensions, elements, or standards are directly or indirectly a component of an administrator's responsibility. Therefore, to ensure an online program's quality, this paper is suggesting that an administrator should first be an organized planner and manager to strategically launch and manage an online program, then an effective motivator to encourage faculty to teach online, and finally a strong supporter for faculty and students.

2. Administrators as Planners and Managers

Administrators have distinctive roles and obligations in facilitating quality learning (Alley, 2001). To ensure the quality of online education, administrators should take active roles in planning and managing online programs. According to McKenzie, Ozkan, and Layton (2005), to make distance education program successful, areas in planning, implementation, and quality control are important for administrators to consider. When planning and managing online programs, administrators should use techniques aligned with quality online learning. According to Alley (2001), specific techniques are: (1) encourage faculty to design web courses for construct knowledge, not just transmission of information; (2) require faculty to develop more detailed course syllabi to include timetables, learning tasks, and learning outcomes; (3) plan for online and remote assessment sites for formative and summative assessments; (4) accommodate faculty's different teaching styles and students' different learning styles in online environments; and (5) promote social interaction between faculty and students. Levy (2003) suggested six considerations when planning online programs in higher education. They are: (1) visions and plans; (2) curriculum; (3) staff training and support; (4) student services; (5) student training and support; and (6) copyright and intellectual property.

Recruiting qualified faculty or instructors to teach online courses is a critical step in planning and managing online programs. The Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET) published *The Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Academic Degree and Certificate Programs* in 1997, in which it emphasized that electronically offered programs should be taught by qualified faculty (WCET, 1997). Furthermore, Husmann and Miller (2001) asserted that because administrators' perceptions on the quality of online programs are based almost exclusively on the performance of faculty, the recruitment of qualified faculty to teach online courses was prudent.

Rahman (2001) suggested a Five C model that administrators may use in recruiting faculty to teach online courses. The Five C model is actually a three-stage model. Stage one is **C**ommunication, where the administrators communicate with prospective faculty regarding the principles, practices, and values of the online education. Stage two is **C**onvince, where the administrators convince the faculty members to gain their support.

Stage two contains two modes, the Conciliatory mode and Contending mode, both could be used when persuading faculty. Stage three is Consummating, where administrators make sure the online environment was built smoothly for the faculty member. The author also suggests four faculty sources to recruit from:

- “1. Full-time professors
2. Local area adjuncts
3. Wide area adjuncts
4. Well qualified professors from other universities nationwide” (2005, p. 6).

3. Administrators as Motivators

Administrators should be motivators in ensuring the quality of online programs. They should motivate faculty to teach online and students to learn online. Administrators can motivate faculty, especially senior faculty, to teach online courses in many ways. According to Giannoni and Tesone (2003), some approaches could be intrinsic or personal rewards, such as tenure and promotion, workload adjustment, or reduction in duties and increase in pay. Dooley and Murphrey’s (2000) study indicated that tenure and promotion policies were considered very important for faculty to embrace online education.

Cuellar (2002) suggested that faculty who are willing to teach online should be provided professional development opportunities in order for them to learn not only the “technological know how, but also education on how to develop courses on strategies to promote interactive online learning” (p. 11). Giannoni and Tesone (2003) conducted a study that determined motivational factors that influenced participation of senior faculty in online learning programs. They found faculty rated release time, personal satisfaction, e-teaching development, technical support for faculty, and professional prestige as motivational factors that influenced their participation in online learning programs. Administrators should bear these considerations in mind when approaching faculty to develop online educational programs.

Administrators should understand faculty needs and concerns in order to motivate faculty to teach online courses. Faculty’s concerns teaching online mostly centered on heavy workload, lack of institutional support, inadequate compensation, incentive structures, loss of autonomy and control of the curriculum, lack of technical training and support, changing roles in online environment, time requirement and time taken from research (Berge, Muilenburg & Haneghan, 2002; Clark, 1993; Levy, 2003; Rockwell et al, 1999; Yang & Cornelius, 2005).

McKenzie, Mims, Bennett, and Waugh (2000) surveyed faculty needs and concerns at State University of West Georgia. The authors found that faculty preferred receiving assistance from the university and administrators in delivering online courses and various training sessions. The study reported faculty’s needs for consistent technical support, more time to design and deliver online courses, more incentives (i.e., laptop, student assistants, merit pays), and helpful administrative support services. The study revealed that faculty hoped administrators would limit online class enrollments, fix

learning management system problems in a timely manner, and respect their wishes to teach online.

4. Administrators as Supporters

Administrators should provide and arrange administrative and technical support for both faculty and students in order to offer quality online programs. Many researchers suggested that providing support, such as training, administrative, monetary, and promotional, is essential for administrators to ensure the quality of online education (McKenzie et al, 2000; Husmann & Miller, 2001; Levy, 2003; Giannoni & Tesone, 2003). As Berge (1998) has argued, online teaching and learning will definitely fail without strong administrative support of programs, training, faculty and students. Moreover, Mayes and Banks (1998) concluded three factors combined to maintain quality and integrity of open learning courses: (1) common, structured course materials; (2) open assessment using a competency-based methodology; and (3) an extensive support and monitoring network. With strong support from administrators, faculty, and students will be more willing to teach and learn online.

Faculty needs support in a number of areas when teaching online. First is the support for teaching online. Online teaching support includes training to teach online, such as supplying concrete examples and sample online courses, use of online technology, access to technical resources, and technical issue support. Course-creation support for faculty is needed, such as instructional design assistance; intellectual property, copyright, technological and media creation; and team-based course creation (Shelton & Saltsman, 2005). Additionally, detailed policies and procedures for faculty are helpful. A useful tool would be an online faculty handbook with summarized policy, typical practices, and common procedures (Shelton & Saltsman).

Administrators should be aware that student support needs to be provided differently than faculty support. Learners must have support for academic advising or counseling, library services, training on equipment and software, financial aid, testing, access to instructional resources, and technology requirements (Simonson & Bauck, 2003). Dooley, Lindner, and Dooley (2005) indicated that student support services may vary depending on the needs of primary distance-source learners and secondary distance-source learners. The primary distance-source learners are adult learners with families or work. Accessibility is the primary motivator for them to choose online programs rather than content or reputation of the institution offering the instruction, because they prefer not to travel. The secondary distance-source learners are usually on campus and choose online learning for its convenience and flexibility in scheduling. They usually have been exposed to technology since their early years of primary school.

The Institute of Higher Education Policy (2000) proposed four quality benchmarks regarding student support services. They are (1) information about programs (i.e., admission requirements, tuition and fees, books and supplies, technical and proctoring requirements); (2) hands-on training and information on how to access library database and services; (3) technical assistance; (4) designated student service personnel and a system to address student complaints. Administrators need to understand that the quality of the online programs can only be ensured when the quality of online teaching and learning is assured.

5. Conclusion

A quality online program requires accountability and quality assurance in many aspects. The Council of Higher Education Accreditation (2002) defined quality assurance in distance learning as “the means by which the institutions or providers set their program goals and measure results against those goals” (p. vi). To measure the quality of their online programs, administrators may consider following the best practices, guidelines, or quality benchmarks published by accreditation bodies or agencies. The Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP, 2000) conducted a study addressing quality benchmarks for Internet-based distance education, and published 24 benchmarks for measuring quality Internet-based learning. The 24 benchmarks are divided into seven categories:

1. institutional support
2. course development
3. teaching/learning
4. course structure
5. student support
6. faculty support
7. evaluation and assessment (p. 2-3)

The Higher Learning Commission (2007) suggests some measurement methods include, but not limited to: documenting students’ academic achievements in courses, keeping records of student retention and graduation rate, comparing students’ performance to the intended program outcomes, monitoring faculty and students’ satisfaction, measuring students’ competence especially using nationwide standard assessments as a comparing base, and maintaining the cost effectiveness of the program. The U.S. Department of Education (2006) recommends many proven practices for evaluation and assessment of an online program, such as interviewing faculty on how they used the course evaluation data to improve their teaching and how these changes affect students’ performance; reviewing and revising the courses periodically; comparing the outcomes for programs offered both online and face-to-face; and documenting the evidence of how the program is improved.

The roles of administrators can never be underestimated. They are the most important factors in success of online education (Brooks, 2003). The U.S. Department of Education (2006) asserted that distance education programs are unlikely to succeed, sustain, and grow without executives’ commitment. Quality online programs are maintained at high levels when administrators realize their roles in the quality assurance process. In short, to ensure quality online programs, administrators must be planners, motivators, promoters, and supporters. When administrators understand clearly what their roles are and the impact their contribution has on the quality of online educational programs, they can begin to take major steps toward achieving quality online education for students.

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