

Chapter 69

High Quality Online Programs: The Role of Leadership and Teamwork to Support Student- Centered Graduate Education

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ABSTRACT

The development of high quality online programs requires ongoing commitment and dedication at all levels of colleges and universities. The availability of online programs and courses benefits working adults by making access to graduate education possible. Online education is also advantageous to the growth of colleges and universities by expanding market reach without requiring major capital expenditures for buildings and operational support staff in new locations. Even though there is ease of entry into new markets with online courses and programs, college and university leaders cannot ignore the need for integrating online programs with the entire institution and providing necessary support services to students and faculty. To ensure high quality in online program offerings, support for online programs must be embedded throughout the various departments within the institution. The role of leadership and teamwork is vital to developing high quality online programming and student-centered support for graduate education.

INTRODUCTION

Online programs offer conveniences and opportunities for working adults interested in returning to the classroom environment to earn advanced professional degrees in fields such as business, communication, counseling, education, engineering, finance, healthcare administration, nursing, organizational leadership, social work, and technology. Graduate level education builds upon learning that takes places at the undergraduate level and focuses on specialized instruction with experiential and research-based learning that encourages the development of self-management and construction of new knowledge.

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High Quality Online Programs

Taking classes online allows working adults the opportunity to pursue graduate education in a way that fits their busy schedules.

Online programs also provide opportunities for expanding market reach and growing student enrollment for many colleges and universities. As professionals working in institutions of higher learning face challenges such as shrinking traditional undergraduate student enrollment, declining government and political support, and increasing costs of higher education, there can be a temptation to view online programming as an easy way to increase university revenue and cash flow with minimal resource investment. Yet, professionals returning to school to earn advanced and professional degrees through graduate education expect more than convenience; they expect high quality and meaningful learning experiences with the potential to advance careers and earnings. In order to provide a high quality online education to graduate students, online graduate education must be a serious priority within the university with intentional support, effective leadership, and teamwork.

Leadership and teamwork play vital roles in the administration of today's colleges and universities and especially those offering online education. Without effective leadership and commitment to online graduate education, the addition of online programs may be reluctantly pursued as an easy way for the institution to subsidize other more valued aspects of university life. Lacking effective leadership and teamwork, online education in general may be perceived as a necessary evil rather than a vital and thriving educational opportunity. When an institution of higher learning offers online graduate programs without intentional support, online graduate students and faculty remain peripheral to the main focus of the university. In this type of environment, online graduate programs, students, and professionals are marginalized. High quality online graduate education requires intentional support through effective leadership and teamwork at all levels of the institution. This chapter is an essay that focuses on online graduate education, what constitutes high quality online programs, and the role that leadership and teamwork play in the development and support of student-centered distance education for graduate students in today's colleges and universities.

ONLINE GRADUATE EDUCATION

Distance learning through online programming is changing the nature and structure of higher education (King & Alperstein, 2015). Technological advancements and the availability of computer-mediated learning management systems now support learning environments that are entirely online, which has made a significant impact on the number of online programs available and the increase in students enrolled in online courses (Kunz & Cheek, 2016; Thiede, 2012). As a result, college and university faculty, staff, and administrators face new challenges that range from the need for appropriate infrastructures to the adoption of best practices in online teaching (Estep & Yates, 2012; Osbourne, 2012). While there are potential difficulties to overcome that are associated with online education, there are also many advantages. Online programs make it possible for college and university leaders to strategically expand educational offerings and extend market reach. Kunz and Cheek (2016) explain, "online distance learning provides the opportunity to reach a working adult market in an expanded, almost limitless geographical area, so institutions looking for growth in their enrollment numbers view online education as a cost-effective and far reaching potential target market" (p. 105).

Online programs are convenient for working adults because instructional content is delivered exclusively through computer-mediated communication and digital learning platforms. The flexibility of

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