

Chapter 32

Research–Based Best Practices for Online Programs: A Dual Administrative– and Instruction–Based Model

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ABSTRACT

This manuscript outlines a dual approach to online best practices that includes both the administrative side and the instructional (faculty) side of distance education. The majority of best practice documents focuses almost exclusively upon instructional best practices and ignores, or only mention in passing, the needed administrative best practices. The author of this research-based best practices manuscript believes that both, working concurrently, are required for a successful and sustainable distance education program. These guidelines are intended to be not only a set of recommendations, but also a policy document that can be readily implemented.

INTRODUCTION

The literature is replete with research on guidelines for distance education and identified best practices (see e.g., Orellana, Hudgins, & Simonson, 2009; Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2008). There are also entire journals dedicated to theory, research, and best practices in distance education such as the AECT's *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*. Thus it might seem somewhat redundant to delineate yet another set of *best practices*. The following document however, differs in that

it outlines a *dual* set of best practices developed to encompass both the administrative and the instructional perspectives in one manuscript. While many of the best practices documents focus on the instructional side almost exclusively, both aspects must be considered in parallel for a systematic understanding of the topic. Consequently, there is, in this researcher's opinion, a need for a *dual* model of best practices based in research and the current literature.

These proposed guidelines have a three-fold purpose: 1) to recommend a research-based minimum standard or level of quality control for current and future online courses; 2) to provide

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standards which will insure a quality distance learning experience for students seeking online courses and degrees; and 3) to assist any institution in need of a published best practices policy document in preparation for a focus visit by a regional or national accrediting body aimed at receiving approval for new electronically offered courses, degrees and certificate programs.

While the vast majority of the published best practices allude to the need for administrative support (see e.g., Abel, 2005a; Simonson, et al., 2009) it is this researcher's belief that administrative support is in reality one of two *concurrent* sets of best practices required for a successful online program. Thus, there are first, those best practices associated with overall administrative practices, and second, those associated with actual instructional practices.

Without major administrative/institutional support, online courses or degree programs could exist, but will be less successful, and likely would remain mired in mediocrity. Abel (2005b) states, "... the involvement of key leaders in prioritizing where to focus online learning development activities was critical and highly correlated with perceived success in these institutions" (p. 76).

A major study (Abel, 2005a) was conducted by the Alliance for Higher Education Competitiveness (A-HEC) after which a summary of the study was published in the *Educause Quarterly* (Abel, 2005b). This study canvassed 21 institutions of all Carnegie classifications to identify those practices most likely to lead to successful online programs. Ranked most important among the "Ingredients for Success" was "executive leadership and support" (Abel, 2005b, p. 75). Therefore this document delineates two distinct but necessarily overlapping sets of best practices, which this author believes in tandem, will result in a quality online program that neither set could fully accomplish separately.

Further, this author strongly concurs with the A-HEC study which found that a *programmatic*

approach is far superior to an individual course approach. Abel (2005b) says,

Probably the most significant finding was that institutions that focused on putting full programs online were about four times as likely to perceive that they had achieved 'overwhelming success' as institutions that focused their efforts at the individual course level. (p. 76)

What follows is a list of the ten major *institutional support structures* applicable to any size institution and believed to be essential to ensure a robust and sustainable online program capable of delivering high quality online courses leading to online degrees.

I. ADMINISTRATIVE/INSTITUTIONAL BEST PRACTICES

1. Executive Leadership

With over 3.9 million students taking online courses, representing a 12% increase over the previous year (Allen & Seaman, 2008) it has become manifestly apparent that online courses have become mainstream, are now part of the 'fabric' of higher education, and must be considered strategically by college administrators in terms of policy. This data comes from the sixth annual *Sloan Report* (Allen & Seaman, 2008) based on survey responses from over 2,500 active, degree-granting public colleges and universities in the U.S. The report states while there eventually will be a limit to the growth of online enrollments, "this limit has not yet been reached" (Allen & Seaman, 2008, p. 6). This suggests it is prudent for key administrators to consider e-learning from the perspective of the overall vision and mission of their institutions. Who are the *key* administrators i.e., those individuals with the primary responsibility for the success of online initiatives? The four top responses in the A-HEC survey to that

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