

To Be or Not to Be: Online Educational Leadership Program

Dr. Angela Farmer

David Hopkins

Mississippi State University

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Online learning is defined as gaining knowledge and skills which are written, communicated, active, supported and managed through use of the internet (Morrison, 2003). Online postgraduate programs are established, and growing the United States. As of 2012, 66% of universities have online courses as a vital role of their learning strategy (Allen & Seaman, 2014). The fall semester of 2012 showed more than 7.1 million students taking at least one online class. Attrition to online programs have shown to be 20% higher than face to face programs, which indicates not only are these programs growing, but are also highly effective (Moody, 2004).

The prospect of being allowed to keep their current employment, being financially burdensome, and cutting down the need for travel or relocation are all benefits that an online programs affords its students (Angelino & Natvig, 2009). In fact, the 2011 Online Learners Priority Report indicated that convenience is the number one reason for enrolling in online programs. According to Reinhart (2008), the reason for online expansion in universities comes from the ease of the Internet and its infinite resources to reach more students than previously possible; thus allowing universities to capitalize on the advantages that today's technology allows.

Based on the statistics of the growing rate and attrition of online learning, developing an online program for Educational Leadership at Mississippi State University is the key for program expansion. As with many post-graduate programs, Educational Leadership is comprised mostly of adults in an established working environment. Because many online doctoral degrees are designed for those non-traditional students, the goal is to enhance the students learning through applied research and scholarly engagement (Radda, 2012). Online programs expand opportunities for those nontraditional students who struggle with maintaining adequate resources. These students are more likely to have a family at home, and prefer online learning when compared to on campus learning (Halsne & Gatta, 2002). Specifically, online programs are sought out for convenience and flexibility (Qvist-Eriksen, 2004). Being required to drive several hours to attend a class may not be feasible, and it may keep prospective students from registering. Many universities offer post-graduate degrees in Educational Leadership, but only a small percentage offer full online programs to obtain the degree.

With universities implementing new online programs yearly, Mississippi State can become one of only three South Eastern Conference (SEC) schools that offers complete online programs for Educational Leadership. Currently, ten SEC schools offer degrees in Educational Leadership, but only the University of Arkansas and the University of Florida offer them in a strictly online format. There are more than 1,000 miles between those two schools, which leaves many prospective students to reach. When exploring more prestigious universities such as Ivy League schools, none of them have online programs for Educational Leadership. This leaves a void where the universities that are first to take the initiative to implement this program will reap the benefits.

Over the past five years enrollment of new graduate students in public universities have declined by 2%, while for profit institutions such as the University of Phoenix, Kaplan, and Capella have seen an increase of 11%. Once minimized in educational institutions, marketing to prospective students is now seen as a must to compete (Constantinides & Zinck, 2011). An effective marketing strategy is analyzing current students and the professions that this program attracts. This allows the program to collect potential student demographic data so contact can be made (Aldridge, 2010). According to the Graduate and Professional School Enrollment Management Corporation a student should be contacted 6-12 times before enrollment occurs. Contact can be in the form of e-mail, social media, phone, or special events.

A U.S. New and World Report article “Online Course Enrollment Climbs for 10th Straight Year” (2013) states that only 30.2% of faculty and administration value online learning when compared to face to face. One reason cited is that not all faculty members have the technological skills, or desire to learn such skills, that are needed with the new generation of students. A new era of learning is changing the way learning is approached, and faculty who do not change will become obsolete. It was once feared that online classes would diminish the demand for professors at universities. With the growing demand of online programs the reverse effect has occurred. It is estimated that nearly 300,000 faculty engage in online learning throughout the country (Finder, 2007). Faculty play a major role in the satisfaction of students enrolled in online programs. The 2011 National Online Learners Priority Report states that students have a higher expectation of online professors than that of face to face professors. In an age of 24/7 technology it may be expected that a professor responds immediately. However, answering e-mails in a timely manner and being reachable in their office are areas of concern for these students.

Once it is determined that an online program will begin, the faculty must determine the most effective source of learning that is conducive for student participation. Jonassen & Kim (2010) have designed a constrained discussion environment; which is a pre-structured environment that guides the students to participate. There may be a pre-defined phrase such as “The point being made here is”. The reasoning for this type of online learning environment is that it engages the students in the desired cognitive processes (Jonassen & Remidez, 2005). When compared to learning in a threaded forum, constrained discussion increased the frequency of interaction, and was found to be highly useful for less assertive students. Oh and Jonassen (2007) concluded that programs that implement on constrained environment generated more evidence posts, and more hypothesis and hypothesis testing posts. Constrained environment is one type of online strategy, but it may not fit for the type of environment being implemented.

Learning strategy instruction is defined as “behaviors and thoughts that a learner engages in during learning, and that are intended to influence the learner’s encoding process” (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986. P. 315). According to Shumaker and Deshler (2006) learning strategy instruction has two main components: cognitions used to finish a task, and metacognitive processes to select a strategy for such task. With adults this strategy has been shown to enhance the interaction between the instructor and learner, and help those struggling with learning the material (Hock & Mellard, 2011).

Gao, Wang, & Sun (2009) used literature from constrained discussion environment and learning strategy instruction to develop the following five online discussion strategies: elaborating and clarifying, making connections, challenging others’ views, building upon others’ views, and questioning. These strategies are linear, and based on a productive discussion model. Gao, Wang, and Sun (2009) stated that learners should be able to comprehend, discuss to

critique, and discuss to construct knowledge. Peer questioning can actually increase the quality of peer interaction in an online setting.

Each strategy has its benefits and limitations, so each university must decide which is best for their particular circumstance. When the instructors are deciding which strategy to use, whether that strategy is appropriate for the task on hand should be considered. The instructor should also be aware that there are overlaps between the online learning strategies, which may result in a student using more than one strategy when participating in an online program (Gao, 2014). As with multiple areas of online learning, timely feedback is important from the instructor. It has been found that many instructors provide feedback to the discussion board as a whole, but not to the particular individual participating in the course. This may result in a student not fully grasping the course content.

When establishing an online program the university, staff have to be aware of the barriers that may occur. Already established is that Educational Leadership is geared toward nontraditional students with established careers. According to Snyder and Dillow (2010) the median age for a doctoral student is 33.7, with many between the ages of 45-55. This age difference means that many students received their bachelors 20-25 years previous and did not have to deal with much of the technology that today's student face. Saade and Kira (2007) discuss computer anxiety and how identify several constructs such as negatives beliefs about computers, insecurity, intimidation, and hesitation. Individuals with high levels of computer anxiety are at a disadvantage. In fact, the two biggest factors of dropping out of online programs are lack of understanding online media and computer related problems (Herbert, 2006).

There are barriers that must be addressed, but research has shown that steps can be made overcome most difficulties that may arise. To assure that a student does not feel alone in the

program, the courses should combine peer interaction and individual assignments (Rovai, 2004). Peer interaction most commonly occurs in the form of online discussion forums. These forums have shown to be more self-governing and thought provoking than in face-to-face meetings (Oztok, Zingaro, Brett, & Hewitt, 2013). These forums have benefits that extend outside of the program as they allows students to interact with those who are becoming their profession colleagues. When exchanging information with their peers, graduate students increase their ability to acquire knowledge (Gansemer-Topf et al., 2006).

The transmission of content through online learning offers the participants a multifaceted approach to content mastery and understanding. In addition to traditional face to face approaches, online delivery generates the added value of the intentional peer mediated interactions that generally occur in a less targeted manner in a brick and mortar classroom setting. Furthermore, the learning that transpires virtually is molded from a unique and real time form where the learner chooses his best timeframe and location of origin rather than a one-size-fits-all approach where the location, the delivery, the interactions and the responses are preconceived by the professor before a single student enters the classroom. To be or not to be, for online delivery of Educational Leadership programs, clearly the time has come.

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