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Introduction

Technological, demographic, and competitive changes in distance education (DE) pose complex leadership and strategic issues for community colleges. Leaders must establish institutional and academic objectives, develop financial and technological strategies, and organize, market, and evaluate DE initiatives. Their objectives and strategies should anticipate and help shape the developing competitive environment in which their colleges operate. This qualitative case study examined DE administrative and staff leadership roles, organization structures, and strategies at three Midwestern community colleges with expanding DE programs. Leadership teams were small. New roles and organizational structures were evolving, and the colleges were maintaining strong video delivery while developing online courses and programs.

While there is abundant research on DE teaching and learning, studies of DE leadership and strategy are sparse. For purposes of this study, DE leaders were the administrators, faculty, and staff who formulated and implemented DE strategy, and strategy established DE objectives, committed resources, and determined how quality and effectiveness was evaluated.

The central research question was: Who were the colleges' DE leaders, and what were their strategies? The specific research questions were:

1. Who were the DE administrative and staff leaders at each college?

2. How was DE organized at each college?

3. What DE strategies were leaders pursuing?

4. What were the similarities and differences in DE leadership and organization?

Conceptual Framework

DE leaders develop and implement academic, technological, and business strategies (Adams, 2001; Bates, 2000). There are several types of DE leadership. The governing board and CEO establish the institutional mission, vision, and policies within which DE is developed, and they may establish or approve specific objectives and plans. Faculty provide instructional leadership, although some approaches to DE have "unbundled" traditional faculty content development and delivery roles. Administrators and professional staff influence official strategy through their recommendations to

executive leaders. They also shape emergent strategies through their decisions and actions as they implement the colleges overall approach to DE (Mintzberg, 1978). This study focused on the administrative and staff leadership roles and organizational structures.

DE strategy encompasses several overlapping domains that are discussed at various levels of detail in the DE literature. Examples of high-level classification schemes include: (a) academics, technology, and finance (Adams, 2001, Bates, 2000), (b) faculty, students, and management (King, Nugent, Russell, Eich, & Lacy, 2000), and (c) technologies, telecommunications, instruction-learning, management, and funding-regulation (Saba, 2001). These broad domains encompass a multitude of DE issues that have been summarized in literature reviews (Howell, Williams, & Linsay, 2003; Levy, 2003), research reports (Bleak, 2002a; Compora, 2003; Shepherd, Martz, Ferguson, & Klein, 2002), practical guides (Bates & Pole, 2003; Bleak, 2002b, Smith, 1998), policy statements (American Council on Education, 2000; Eaton, 2001; Eaton, 2002, and news articles (Carnevale & Olsen, 2003; Carr, 2001; Sausner, 2003). For example, Howell, Williams, and Linsay identified 32 trends that they grouped into six categories, including: students and enrollments, faculty, academics, economics, and distance learning.

Another approach to DE strategy focuses on strategic planning processes. Some institutions follow elaborate, formal processes (Berge & Schrum, 1998; Broskoske, 2000; Hache, 1998; Pisel, 2001), whereas others develop DE through faculty initiatives and through experimentation (Adams, 2001). Traditional, formal approaches to DE strategic planning follow several stages: (a) formation of a planning team; (b) data collection and analysis; (c) selection of objectives and means; (d) action planning and resource allocations; and (e) evaluation and control (Hache). Other DE strategic planning processes are organized around issues. For example, Berge and Schrum's DE planning process considered: mission; human, financial, and technological resources; market opportunities, competition, and cost structures; academic standards, quality, accountability, and learning paradigms; and faculty, student, and administrative support systems.

Based on the literature and on the author's experience, the following framework summarizes important DE strategic issues and questions (Adams, 2003):

- Leadership and organization – Who is responsible for what, and how do they interact with one another, both formally and informally?
- Overall direction and objectives – Why develop and deliver DE?

· Courses, programs, delivery methods, and services – What academic content is appropriate for DE; what delivery technologies will be used; and how will student services be provided to distance learners?

· Markets, customers, competitors, and marketing – Who will the college serve through DE; with whom will it compete; and what messages and media will it use to attract students?

· Instructional development, technical support, and faculty issues – How will content be developed; how will distance faculty and students be supported; and how will faculty be recruited, retained, and compensated?

· Finances – What are the revenue and cost expectations, and what is the DE financial plan?

· Quality assurance and improvement – How will DE instructional and institutional quality be evaluated and improved?

· Partnerships – What relationships will the college form with educational, business, and community partners?

Methods

The sample for this qualitative multi-case study included 16 administrators, professional staff, and faculty who were DE leaders at their colleges. Data were collected through semi-structured, tape-recorded interviews conducted between January 6, 2003, and March 6, 2003, and from documents, observations, and archival records. Each participant received a copy of the interview questions attached to an e-mail confirming the interview date, time, and location.

Data analysis used codes, categories, and visual representations. The codes came from the author's experience, from the literature, and from the participants' words. The author began coding when he read the first interview transcript, and he created and revised codes as analysis progressed. The data were first coded and sorted using multi-case leadership and strategy themes. Next, the coded data for each college were examined and resorted for further analysis.

Verification was achieved through member checks, by using different theoretical lenses, and through discussions with other researchers. Validity was assured through the use of a sound case data base and through "analytical generalization" (Yin, 1994) that compared the findings with theories from the DE literature. Research ethics were addressed by asking participants to voluntarily participate and to sign informed consent forms, by informing them about the purpose of the study, by using pseudonyms, and by reporting both the author's and the participants' interpretations of reality (Stake, 1995).

The Colleges and the Participants

Elm, Maple, and Oak were public community in a Midwestern state with a diversified economy that included important agricultural and agribusiness sectors. As was the case in many states in 2003, this state faced budget problems, and its public colleges and universities experienced budget reductions. Each college had an independent board of governors, but all three were members of the state community college association and operated under the jurisdiction of the state higher education commission. The colleges were funded by tuition, local property taxes, state appropriations, and local ancillary service revenues, and their operating budgets ranged from $25 to $50 million.

There were five participants from each of two colleges and six from the third college, for a total of 16. Six women and ten men participated in this study, and all were identified as college DE leaders by the three site sponsors and by other participants. The participants included vice presidents of instruction, deans and directors of distance and extended education, academic deans, instructional designers/trainers/technologists, and at least one current or former DE instructor at each college.

DE Leaders, Organization, and Strategies

Elm Community College's DE Leaders and Organization

Elm Community College served over 160,000 residents in one corner of the state and enrolled approximately 7,500 head-count credit students. Elm provided access throughout its service area via three distance delivery methods: interactive video delivery to more than 50 sites, videotaped telecourses, and Web-based classes. Although Elm had only recently initiated online classes, it had been involved in DE since the early 1990's when it delivered its first courses through interactive video and through video tapes and postal correspondence. Elm was connected by fiber optics to all the high schools in its service area, and Elm's DE leaders were proud of their interactive video classes.

Gail, Elm's Dean of Extended and Distance Education, was responsible for all of the college's distance learning activities except its newly developed online courses. Gail had worked at Elm for 14 years. Gail worked closely with Elm's other five education deans who were responsible for courses, content, and instructors, while Gail was responsible for coordinating other aspects of DE, including scheduling, video networks, satellite arrangements, and telecourses.

Frank, the Director of Distance Education, was responsible for the telecourses and for arranging and scheduling the interactive video course. He and the two regional coordinators who managed Elm's two off-campus education centers reported to Gail. Frank described himself as the liaison "between the division deans and the students" for Elm's interactive video courses and telecourses. Frank said, he found "out what the deans want[ed] to put out into the communities and . . . what students [were] requesting" and worked "to make that happen." Frank had worked at Elm for 19 years. He played a key role in Elm's DE partnerships with the high schools and with other post-secondary institutions.

As Vice President of Instruction, Evan was "the overall supervisor and coordinator" of Elm's academic programs. He had worked at Elm since the late 1960's. Evan reported to the president and worked with the five academic deans, and with Gail to ensure appropriate DE delivery to Elm's 20 county area. The five academic deans were responsible for the programs and the faculty, while Gail said she oversaw "the distance learning function of the college." Evan was directly responsible for Elm's developing online DE initiative, which had recently launched its first 15 courses.

Evan stressed the importance of the Board of Governors and the President supporting DE. He said, board support is critical "because they're the ones that will give us the direction," and the president's interest is essential because DE "has to fall within [the] role and mission, as he sees it for Elm Community College." Evan, Gail, the academic deans, Frank, the librarian and the instructional technologist planned and coordinated DE and other academic activities at the weekly meetings of the educational services division. "I would say that is probably the heart of [DE coordination] because that is the group that is responsible for programming," said Gail.

Carl was Elm's instructional technologist. He described himself as "the head of the support area for online courses." He and his assistant supported faculty and students in all aspects of online learning, from instructional development through student assessment. Carl had worked at Elm for about three years. Because Evan had been instrumental in the successful launch of online DE, Carl reported directly to Evan, rather than to Gail. Evan said Elm was considering reorganizing its DE structure by making Gail responsible for all forms of DE delivery. Gail believed that this would improve efficiency and better support Elm's goal of expanding DE enrollments.

As one of Elm's five academic division deans, Diane was responsible for several departments. With respect to DE, Diane said she ensured that instructors were qualified and that DE course designs and

delivery were “equivalent with what [was] offered on campus.” Diane also facilitated any course related issues that might arise for either faculty or students. Diane had worked at Elm for 18 years and had been a leader in the expansion of DE.

Helen taught English and foreign language via interactive video. She had taught at Elm for over ten years and had been teaching DE courses for most of that time. She was a “firm believer” in DE and stated that it was “one of the best ways” for Elm to serve its 20 county area. As a member of an academic division, Helen was supervised and evaluated by Diane.

Elm did not have a comprehensive instructional design and technology support function, and because Elm outsourced its course management system, the information technology (IT) staff did not support online DE. Evan said that IT was “standing in the wings” in case Elm decided to host its own online courses. In that event, “they’re going to be an intricate player, and it may require some realignment,” he said. On the other hand, Gail relied on the IT department for technology planning and for supporting interactive video delivery. IT also supported Elm’s online registration system.

Elm’s DE Strategies

DE was an integral part of Elm’s mission, and access and enrollment growth were key DE goals. Elm emphasized general education courses and was committed to providing equivalent student services to DE students. Elm focused on time and/or place bound traditional students in its service area, while reaching out to new populations and to nontraditional students. DE allowed the college to serve communities and employers throughout its service area. Competition was not a major concern, and DE marketing was mainly limited to information about courses.

Elm provided DE via telecourses, interactive video, and the Web. Its fledgling online program was hosted by WebCT, and Elm was concerned about the cost of expanding its WebCT license. Its other financial issues were telephone line charges, state budget cuts, and extra compensation for DE faculty. Elm was committed to comparable quality in its DE and face-to-face courses and was seeking NCA accreditation to offer all of its degrees via DE. Elm’s principal DE partners were high schools, the Educational Resource Agencies (ERAs) that operated the five distance learning consortiums in its service area, and other community colleges in the state.

Maple Community College’s DE Leaders and Organization

Maple Community College served a 15 county area with a total population of 450,000. Maple’s head-count credit enrollment was approximately 8,000. Unlike Elm and Oak, Maple’s service area included a large city with a population of 200,000. One of Maple’s three campuses was located in this growing city. The other two campuses were located in smaller cities within 50 miles of the urban campus, leaving a large portion of Maple’s 10,000 square mile area without easy physical access to a campus. Maple delivered DE through videotaped telecourses, an interactive video network, one-way and two-way satellite transmissions, and the Internet.

Jeff, the Director of Distance Learning was responsible for DE operations and for supporting program-driven growth in distance learning. Jeff, who had been at Maple for 12 years, had dean-level status and met every other week with the instructional deans and with Lanny, the instructional vice president. Lanny provided oversight and direction for all educational activities. Lanny had been at the college for 13

years and was a member of the president's administrative council, where DE was considered the same as an academic division for budgetary and other decision making purposes. However, Lanny said the college had "not taken faculty and put them in the distance learning division."

Pam was the Distance Learning Coordinator. She had been employed at Maple for 11 years and worked closely with Jeff, the deans, and the program chairs on planning, and scheduling. Pam assisted faculty with training and delivery support, especially software questions. Ruth, a Program Co-chair who had been at Maple for seven years, worked with Jeff on planning the further expansion of her online program. Ruth also provided assisted other program chairs who were developing online programs. Mike, the Distance Education Director, reported to Jeff and managed the telecourses and the scheduling and support for the interactive video courses. Mike had worked at Maple for 22 years.

Maple's DE Strategies

The core of Maple's DE strategy was to continue serving the time and/or place bound residents of its 15 county service area through telecourses and interactive video classes while rapidly expanding its online courses and degree programs to provide another option for its local customers and a product for the national DE market. This strategy required that the college maintain quality, install a new course management system, and expand its DE support activities. Unfortunately, the college's DE strategy was constrained by limited financial resources, an overworked full-time faculty, uneven support by some senior administrators, and inadequate planning. Secondary and supporting strategies included collaborations with other community colleges, partnerships with area high schools and ERAs, extra compensation of online faculty, and short cycle times for developing new online programs.

To some extent, Maple risked becoming the victim of its own success. It had pioneered online programs in the state and needed to consolidate its gains and to strengthen its support processes. Instead, the college was committed to moving into a much more complex and competitive national market that would tax its limited resources. As Lanny suggested, Maple's leaders recognized the risks, but they also saw the potential for the college to gain additional revenues that could be invested to strengthen online DE.

Oak Community College's DE Leaders and Organization

Oak served a mostly rural 25-county area with a population of about 300,000. Its three campuses were located in cities with populations of between 20,000 and 40,000. In addition, Oak operated three primary learning centers in cities that ranged in population from 5,000 to 25,000, and it offered credit courses at additional learning centers in 90 smaller cities and towns throughout its service. Oak's head-count credit enrollment was approximately 7,000. The college provided print-based and electronic distance learning formats, including Internet, two-way interactive video, and one-way video.

Bill, a campus Dean of Instructional Services, Irwin, Dean of Distance and Extended Education, and Nick, the Vice President of Instruction, were Oak's senior DE leaders. Bill was responsible for electronic delivery technologies and support, and Irwin was responsible for individualized DE and for the learning centers that supported all forms of DE. Bill and Irwin reported to Nick and were members of his educational services committee. This committee also included the other two academic deans and faculty representatives. Bill and his team made recommendations to the educational services committee, and Nick presented this committee's recommendations to the college president and to his

cabinet. Bill and Irwin had worked at Oak for 20 years, and Nick had been there for over 30 years.

Alice, the Learning Technologies Director, had been at Oak for three years. She reported to Bill and supervised the media services department that provided faculty training and supported DE delivery via the Internet, satellite transmissions, and the college's own video network. Oak's academic programs were led by Kirk and other associate deans who reported to the deans of instructional services on each of Oak's three campuses. Kirk had worked at Oak for 11 years.

Oak's DE Strategies

Oak's primary DE objective was to provide access to the residents of its service area. In order to advance this objective, Oak sought to acquire and deploy up-to-date electronic technologies, while maintaining learning centers in a large number of communities. Oak used several delivery video technologies and needed to upgrade and consolidate its aging video systems. The college had been involved in online education for three years and had encouraged interested instructors to develop online courses. As a result, the college offered many online courses, but it did not have any online degree programs. Oak enrolled a limited number of out-of-state students and did not actively compete on a national basis. In fact, DE competition was not a major strategic issue, and DE marketing emphasized course availability.

Oak provided extensive support for its DE faculty, and DE delivery technologies were integrated with other instructional technologies. DE academic decisions were made by faculty and by the associate deans who led the various academic areas. Money was viewed as a major constraint, but although Oak had low tuition rates, image and quality were important to DE leaders. Oak participated in the North Central Association Higher Learning Commission's Academic Quality Improvement Project, and quality improvement was a central element of the college culture. Oak's major partners were high schools, distance learning consortiums, and other community colleges in the state. The high schools provided classrooms and early-entry students; the consortiums provided video connections; and the college partnerships allowed Oak to share programs.

Overall, Oak's DE strategy was to capitalize on its strengths, while it learned by experimentation. Oak continued operating an extensive network of learning centers to support postal-delivered DE courses while it moved into online education. It allowed faculty to determine what online courses to develop before it considered online degree programs. Oak wanted to be "state of the art" in technology, but instructional quality, learning, and budget constraints remained its paramount concerns. Despite its financial challenges, Oak provided extensive support for DE faculty. Although there was little formal DE strategic planning, the college followed a coherent DE strategy.

Leadership Patterns Compared

The colleges' DE leadership and organizational choices were equivalent in two respects. First, Evan, Nick, and Lanny, the vice presidents of instruction, had overall responsibility for DE, and second, the academic deans at Elm and Maple, and the associate deans at Oak were responsible for content and faculty. Beyond that, DE leadership and organization were unique at each college.

Mary and Irwin, the deans of distance and extended education were key DE leaders at Elm and Oak, but Maple had appointed Jeff as director of distance learning and had separated DE from continuing

education. Carl, Elm's instructional technologist, provided online support and reported directly to Evan, the vice president of instruction. Alice, Oak's learning technologies director, supported video and online DE, and reported to Bill, a campus dean of instructional services; whereas, Pam trained and assisted online faculty and reported to Jeff.

These, and other, differences in DE leadership and organization were due to three factors: each college's size and basic organizational structure, the maturity and character of each college's DE initiative, and the particular skills and abilities of individual DE leaders. Elm was the smallest and had a single campus with a fairly cohesive culture. By contrast, Maple and Oak operated as small community college systems, with the three campuses at each college retaining a significant degree of independence.

DE was also somewhat different at each college. Elm was only in its first year of online courses, whereas Maple and Oak had provided online classes for at least three years. Maple was the only college with online degree programs, and Oak had the only individualized, learning center-supported form of DE. Finally, leadership roles reflected individual skills and abilities. Evan had played a key role in launching Elm's online program and remained directly involved. Based on his DE and information technology experience, Bill provided college-wide educational technology leadership. Jeff helped develop Maple's first online courses, and he became responsible for DE and for leading the expansion of Maple's online degree programs.

Strategies Compared

There were similarities in the three colleges' DE strategies, but each college implemented the common strategies in different ways. All three DE programs were led by the college's VP of instruction, but there were numerous leadership and organizational differences. All three colleges focused on time and/or place bound students in their service areas, but Maple offered online degrees and was pursuing national niche markets for its specialized DE degree programs. The three colleges emphasized general education courses as the core of their DE activities, but their delivery strategies varied. They all delivered online, interactive video, and individualized DE, but only Oak operated area-wide learning centers.

The colleges were not particularly concerned about local competitors, and their DE marketing efforts were limited, although Maple recognized that this would change when it went national. All three colleges emphasized training and support for DE faculty, but they each organized and staffed this function differently. Each college's training and support was adequate, but Maple was close to overwhelming its sole instructional developer-trainer. Technology upgrades and costs were important to Elm, Maple, and Oak, but they emphasized different issues. Elm faced WebCT license limits. Maple needed a course management system, and Oak had outdated video equipment.

With the exception of Maple's emerging national programs, none of the colleges saw DE as a money maker. Tuition rates were the same for DE courses as for face-to-face courses, and DE was a way to boost enrollment-driven state support. The three colleges also pursued similar approaches to quality assurance and improvement and to partnering. Quality began with the expectation of consistency in teaching and learning, regardless of delivery method, and was measured by student evaluations and other indicators. The colleges' key partners were high schools, distance learning consortiums, and the state's other community colleges, but there were variations in how the colleges implemented their

quality and partnering strategies.

Implications and Recommendations

Although electronic DE has been evolving for the last 75 years, the current cycle of technological advances is particularly disruptive. Geographic boundaries are falling; new competitors are emerging; students expect technological sophistication; and faculty roles are changing. The DE leaders at Elm, Maple, and Oak responded to these opportunities and challenges by capitalizing on existing strengths and by creating new capabilities. Each college's DE efforts were led by a small group of DE administrators and professional staff. Each college had a strong history of interactive video courses and individualized DE through videotapes or print materials, and all the colleges took experimental approaches to developing online DE.

Each college or university must fashion a DE strategy that is tailored to its history, culture, and identity and that recognizes market opportunities and competitive threats. There are no simple formulas. DE strategy should begin with goals, capabilities, and resource requirements, and it should link internal decisions about academics, staffing, technology, finances, quality, marketing, and alliances to dynamic market environments.

DE strategy may be established through formal planning processes; administrative leaders may develop it informally; or DE strategy may emerge from faculty initiatives. Fully developed strategies are integrated sets of ideas that are communicated to, and accepted by, faculty, staff, and administrators and endorsed by CEOs and governing boards. However, strategy is rarely fully developed or static (Mintzberg, 1978), and it may not be universally understood or accepted. Consequently, leaders should recognize the "bureaucratic, collegial, political, [and] symbolic" decision making processes at their institutions (Birnbaum, 1988, p. 201) in planning and implementing DE.

Although the DE strategies at Elm, Maple, and Oak may appear somewhat quaint compared to those of Rio Salado Community College (Scarafiotti, 2003) and other community colleges with large DE enrollments, they are highly relevant to the majority of community colleges that have smaller DE programs. These colleges are likely to have small, multi-talented DE leadership teams, limited financial resources, and strong local reputations and partnerships. They may also be concerned about recruiting and compensating DE faculty, about new technologies and potential competitors, and about changing service area demographics. The leadership patterns and the DE strategies at Elm, Maple, and Oak provide examples that are worth considering.

Further research on DE leadership and strategy should examine the roles of faculty, presidents, and boards in formulating and evaluating DE strategy. DE planning practices are especially worthy of attention. Although the DE strategy literature suggested formal (and often elaborate) strategic planning processes, none of the three colleges utilized such processes. Planning processes and effectiveness should be examined by focusing the relationship between formal strategic planning, ad hoc operational planning, and the achievement of DE goals and objectives.

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