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Attributes of a Distance Education Leader and the Issues of Distance Education

The success of distance education is highly reliant upon leadership. Higher education institutions seeking distance education leaders have very limited options. The selection typically includes internal candidates or faculty members that use technology in their courses (Nworie, Haughton, & Oprandi, 2012). Regardless of the candidates' background, the distance education leader must embody specific attributes to succeed in the digital age.

Visionary

A distance education leader must be a visionary. This attribute is characterized by the ability to seek the next best opportunity for success. Distance education is saturated with technology, software programs, and competitive e-learning markets. A visionary leader is open to innovative ideas and groundbreaking technology. A visionary leader is not stifled by the status quo. Nworie, et al. contends distance education leaders are "in a position that oversees practices and is evolutionary, particularly at a time that digital technologies and changing pedagogy affect instructional practices and delivery systems" (Nworie, Haughton, & Oprandi 2012, pg. 5). Traditional leaders operate as managers or fulfill a particular function. Visionary leaders often functions outside of managerial role. A visionary leader could be involved in collaborative partnerships, organization structure, and international collaborations. The distance education leader with this attribute is active in the e-learning community and able to assist institution leadership with marketing strategies and achieving a competitive advantage. These characteristics are important to academia because the digital age leader functions in an evolutional environment.

Knowledgeable

Institutional leaders should have fundamental knowledge of technology and distance education pedagogy. Leaders who are knowledgeable of cost, infrastructure, management process and curriculum are essential to the operation of a creditable distance education program. Distance education leaders should be familiar with the application and management of the technology offered to faculty. Being knowledgeable demonstrates to faculty, administrators and students that the institution is enthusiast and accepting of e-learning.

Adaptable

Many distance education programs operate within a traditional environment. Distance education under the hierarchy of the traditional institution will present challenges. Keppell et al. posits that the hierarchy model of leadership in traditional higher education institutions is inappropriate to further strategic change (Keppell, O'Dwyer, Lyon, & Childs, 2011). The distance education leader in the traditional environment must adapt to system level protocol while promoting the objectives related to distance education. Traditional higher education "functions at a slower pace and is not flexible to evolving trends and practices that are necessary to advance higher education" (Otte & Benke, 2006, pg. 29). Consequently, the distance education leader must persuade the leaders in the traditional hierarchy that new technology, new pedagogy, and new markets require a flexible leadership style.

Alternative leadership styles may be utilized to transition the traditional hierarchy of higher education to a more adaptable form of leadership. Keppell posits that principles of distributive leadership may have potential in creating widespread strategic change (Keppell, O'Dwyer, Lyon, & Childs, 2011). Distance education is a specialized field. As such institutional leaders could benefit from the collaborative attributes of the distributive style of leadership. Distance education leaders can function in a decision-making role while utilizing expertise in

technology, e-learning practices, and pedagogy (Keppell, O'Dwyer, Lyon, & Childs, 2011).

Beaudoin suggest higher education can no longer afford to persist in old methods of teaching and

learning. Therefore, transformational leadership can help institutions in reshape and adapt to

environmental change (Beaudoin, 2002). Both of these leadership styles can be used in

traditional academic environments to formulate a more pliable hierarchy.

Motivator

A distance education leader must provide the motivation necessary for learners, faculty

and other subordinates to fulfill their goals. The motivational leaders create environments

encouraging creativity, drive, and comradery. Siddique et al. describes a leaders ability to

instigate and motivate followers as an "art" (Siddique, Hassan,.Khan, & Fatima, 2011, pg. 188).

Distance education leaders can strengthen educational institutions by motivating decision-makers

to employ the information technology perspective to enrich the institutions strategic plan.

Respected

Demonstrated knowledge of the distance education pedagogy and technology will

produce respect. A positive image can attract prominent benefactors, funding, and quality

faculty. A respected leader will be privy to arenas not normally accepted by the main stream.

Roche suggests change is achieved only when leaders have a political power base (Keppell,

O'Dwyer, Lyon, & Childs, 2011). Access to the political power base within academia would

give the distance education environment access to the organizational structure thereby

influencing society, ideals and the future of distance education. Respect at the systems level will

afford leaders the opportunity to advance distance education objectives, eliminate

misconceptions, and implement operational concepts essential for success of distance education.

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A well respected leader is a visionary, knowledgeable, adaptable, and motivational. Although a leader embody these attributes, issues still arise within the distance education environment.

Critical Organizational Issues in Distance Education

Institutions that provide distance education are susceptible to diverse student population. Education is no longer restricted behind the walls of the classroom. There is a global multi-cultural educational population. Distance education leaders must attend to various issues in order to promote accessible education. Universities must continually evaluate their teaching and learning techniques, and curriculum to assure the inclusion of this growing population.

Connectivity: A New Dimension to Teaching and Learning

The use of online learning has created an innovative dimension to teaching and learning. Reinhart predicts "The new digital university will have the web rather than disciplines and the library as its virtual center with (nearly) infinite access to the larger peripheral world" (Reinhart, 2008, p. 13). This new digital university is managed through the concept of connectivity. Connectivism is the one of the most recent pedagogical approach that lends itself to the current social and technological trends in distance education. This theory contends that learning takes place through diverse networks of connections which distributes knowledge (Siemens, 2008b).

Connectivity creates specific challenges for teachers not accustom to distance education. The teacher no longer exclusively administers teaching, curriculum, and learning activities. The learner has principle authority on the learning process. As such, teachers have poor personal interaction with students, increase workloads, lack of equitable incentive, and are obligated to work collaboratively with instructional designers and production technicians (Owusu-Ansah, Neill, & Haralson, 2011). The principles of connectivity afford the learners and facilitators cutting edge accessibility and self governance. This new way of learning is seen both in a

negative and positive light. Nevertheless it is changing academia as it gains popularity

worldwide, and has added an exciting layer of pedagogy to the evolution of distance education.

Pedagogical Approach

Emerging technology and the expansion e-learning markets require institutions to revisit

their organizational structure. This is a critical issue because successful institutions continually

seek opportunities to enhance the pedagogical and structural quality of their institution.

McFarlane contends "organizational structure is important because it shapes pedagogical

approach" (McFarlane, 2011, pg. 16). The integration of technology is often the result changes in

curriculum, assessment, and professional development (McFarlane, 2011, pg. 16). The success

of e-learning as a new form of pedagogy should admonish institutional leaders to embrace the

social and technological advances in education. By doing so, leaders can determine whether the

current pedagogy accommodates the growing interests of the mature, career-minded distance

education learner. Providing the proper pedagogical approach is a major issue worth the

investment of a second look at organizational structure.

Competition: MOOCs

Entities are capitalizing on the benefits of connectivism. Globalization, e-learning tools,

and innovative perspectives on teaching and learning have warranted consideration of alternative

methods of e-learning. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are administered independent of

traditional academic course content. MOOCs consist of social networks, field experts, and free

online resources connected by learners coordinating their own personal learning goals

(Rodriguez, 2012). Discerning education leaders should explore the significance of increasing its

capacity to create and distribute knowledge. The popularity of MOOCs is escalating around the

world, and many elite universities are using providers like Coursera to advance their university.

Renee Burrell
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OMDE604

Coursera provides MOOC services to Johns Hopkins, Brown University, Ohio State, Duke University, Princeton, Rutgers and UMUC (Coursera, 2013). The success of MOOCs is an exciting development in the distance education community. Educational leaders should reflect on marketing strategies and consider whether to capitalize on this prolific market or to develop techniques to protect existing student population.

Conclusion

Similar to any organizational structure, distance education experience pivotal points that present opportunity for growth. The introduction of new teaching and learning practices gives pause to those comfortable with old academic strategies. The organizational structure of an entity is heavy guarded and requires extra ordinary circumstances to penetrate. Despite of all these challenges, distance education is marching forward with tenacity proving evolution of education is alive and well.

Renee Burrell
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OMDE604

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