From the Director:
What About Distance Technology?

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Over the past decade, UCEA and its member faculty have worked diligently to develop a research-based understanding of the effective leadership preparation. As a result of these and complementary efforts, we now have a fairly robust understanding of the factors that make programs effective. We also have rich case examples of each of these factors, which serve as exemplars, and evaluation tools that can be used by programs seeking to improve their effectiveness. UCEA has invested quite a bit of time over the last few years highlighting and promoting these factors to educational leadership faculty, state leaders, policymakers, and other stakeholders in an effort to foster understanding and widespread adoption.

An issue that has started coming up more often in my conversations about effective preparation programs is distance technology or online programs. For years distance education was limited to correspondence courses, radio, and broadcast television. Within the past 10 years the development of new technologies has enabled new possibilities for interaction and information access. As a result, universities, colleges, and individual programs increasingly are experimenting with distance technology, creating web-enhanced or fully online programs.

In the context of quality preparation discussions, the issue of distance technology tends to be raised as a negative. I frequently hear comments like, “In the end, it won’t matter how much better our programs are. All students care about these days is convenience and cost, which they can get from all these online programs.” The implication of such statements is that online programs are not only cheaper and more convenient but also of lesser quality. Such blanket assumptions are unhelpful.

Granted, a number of online and distance technology-based programs are of questionable quality and cause me serious concern (e.g., the DVD-based programs purchased from Higher Education Holdings and offered through a variety of institutions across the nation that provide a master’s degree in educational administration in 18 months for less than $5,000). However, we cannot conflate all distance education with such negative cases. They are not all good or all bad. And, if done well, they are not terribly inexpensive, at least not for the institution.

I am neither a huge proponent of nor an opponent of expanding distance learning, but given the huge impact that technology has had on my life—how I communicate, how I get my news, how I make purchases, and how I get information—I am convinced that the Internet and other forms of technology provide amazing platforms for learning. We need only explore a few of the tools commonly used today, such as e-mail, listservs, broadcast video, interactive television, multiple-user object-oriented environments (MOOs), wiki-spaces, Google-docs, YouTube, streaming media, and videoconferencing tools like Skype, to see some of the possibilities.

In a recent Chronicle of Higher Education commentary titled, “The Excellent Inevitability of Online Courses,” Brooks (2009) noted that online courses grew 19.7% between 2002 and 2007. Compare that percentage with the growth in the student population during that time: 1.5%. The interest in online learning opportunities seems to be growing, and as a result, you may find yourself in the not so distant future in a consequential conversation with your dean, provost, or program chair focused on developing or expanding online offerings in your program area. It is better to be knowledgeable, to know what is available, and to have thought through the implications of distance technology for your program and courses than to lack such knowledge or to have given no thought to the issue at all.

Ample resources are available that review new technology, conferences, put on by organizations from Sloan-C to The University of Texas System, where cutting-edge developers and technology users describe the latest developments and their classroom applications, and a growing body of research on effectiveness of various methods and efforts. According to Johnson (2003), “Crucial to the success of a distance education enterprise were technological and support staff, policies and procedures, instructor and staff training, program identification procedures, marketing processes, and instructional design and development systems” (p. 104). For the Open University, one of the pioneers of distance education, successful distance education rests on four pillars (Johnson, 2003):

1. high quality, multimedia learning materials, developed by teams of academics and experts
2. personal support to each student from a living breathing human being who knows the student’s name and aspirations
3. efficient logistics and administration
4. teaching that is rooted in research (p. 38)

Boettcher (1998) also emphasized that there is no simple answer to the question of cost in time and money to develop and deliver distance-learning programs. She noted that budgeting plans need to consider all phases of course delivery, including design, development (e.g., it takes an estimated 18 hours for a faculty member to create 1 hour of quality distance instruction), instructor training, and dissemination. In addition to planning and budgeting for infrastructure, marketing, recruiting, admissions, student advisement, assessment, library, and technical support resources, faculty must be trained in distance technologies. They also must be willing to make adjustments to their teaching style. One thing is clear: Quality distance programming cannot be done on a whim or on a shoestring.

Another important concern held by the faculty I have spoken with is that distance learning is inappropriate for the preparation of leaders because the work of a leader is people intensive. Someone recently said to me, “Leaders lead face-to-face. It makes little sense to prepare them in isolation.” Although much progress has been made in the development of online communities, my review of tools has led me to the conclusion that they are not currently adequate for providing the substantive face-to-face learning essential to quality leadership preparation. Granted, not all teaching and learning require that students and faculty both be present, but the internship, for example, requires sustained interaction with others. A well-planned, high-quality hybrid model, then, could be an acceptable option for educational leadership preparation.

Unfortunately, there is not a lot of research (at least not that I have found) focused directly on the quality use of distance technology in preparation of educational leaders. Research has identified several teaching principles associated with improved learning outcomes in technology-enhanced and distance programs. According to this research (Ehrmann, 2000), good practice
1. encourages contacts between students and faculty,
2. develops reciprocity and cooperation among students,
3. uses active learning techniques,
4. gives prompt feedback,
5. emphasizes time and task,
6. communicates high expectations, and
7. respects diverse talents and ways of learning. (p. 38)

While these general principals are certainly helpful, it is time that we learned more about what works in this area for the preparation of educational leaders. UCEA is helping to provide some insight. For example, the newly released Handbook of Research on the Education of School Leaders (Young, Crow, Murphy, & Ogawa, 2009) contains a chapter on delivery (Grogan, Bredeson, Sherman, Preis, & Beaty, 2009) that contains a small section on distance technology.

Additionally, the director of the UCEA Center for the Advanced Study of Technology Leadership in Education (CASTLE), Scott McLeod, has agreed to have his center host an interview series focused on the use of distance technology in educational leadership programming. The purpose of the interview series is to share research, knowledge, and experience concerning the quality use of distance technology in the preparation of educational leaders.

If you do find yourself in a conversation about distance education or on a development team for online curriculum, do your homework. Institutions that do engage in distance education will need to consider both the research on effective leadership preparation and what is known about effective distance education. Leadership preparation programs are responsible for ensuring that graduate students gain the knowledge and skills needed to lead educational organizations that support student learning. Regardless of how a program is delivered, it must be of high quality.

References