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Distance learning began as an institutional innovation, but as the field matures it faces challenges in finding its place in the community college mainstream. This chapter describes the best practices that helped the Extended Learning Institute at Northern Virginia Community College evolve into a mature distance learning program that is successfully integrated into the institution.

Institutional Issues When Distance Learning Joins the Mainstream

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When institutions create distance learning programs, their focus is usually on surviving and building enrollments. They give relatively little thought to the issues the program will face over time as it grows and matures. Which issues will drop away, which will still be important, and which new ones will emerge? This chapter describes some of the original principles that helped Northern Virginia Community College's (NVCC) distance learning program become successful, and some of the new problems it is facing now that it is part of the college mainstream.

NVCC has been offering distance learning courses for almost thirty years. Its distance learning program, the Extended Learning Institute (ELI), was established in 1975 as a collegewide unit in a multicampus environment. Last year over fifteen thousand students enrolled in more than two hundred asynchronous courses; distance learners accounted for 8 percent of the college's enrollment and constituted a student head count that was at times larger than several of the college's traditional campuses. By almost every measure, ELI and distance learning have become very successful. Although that success may have been due in part to luck or fortuitous events, much can be attributed to the foundation on which it was based and how ELI dealt with the challenges it faced.

As an innovative institutional program, ELI was free from a number of administrative, organizational, and political issues. Yet now that it has entered the mainstream of the college, it faces challenges much more complex than when it was a start-up program. How ELI and NVCC respond to these new issues will affect ELI's ability to innovate and respond to new

opportunities, and may affect distance learning at the college for years to come. “Mature programs that have been offering distance learning for a long time are caught in the middle between their safe and solid base of experience and the unknown of a new digital world. Whether the new technologies are merely a further enhancement to their programs or a radical paradigm shift remains to be seen” (Sachs, 1999, p. 66).

A Foundation of Best Practices

Northern Virginia Community College’s strong foundation of instructional development facilitated ELI’s early growth. Among its staff were instructional developers who worked with faculty to design distance learning courses and to create or adapt instructional materials for learners who would not be on campus and would study on their own. ELI’s early leaders had experience developing some of the earliest technology-based distance learning programs. During the 1970s and early 1980s, a body of best practices for developing effective instructional units emerged. In 1984, the Division for Instructional Development of the Association for Educational Communications and Technology published a paper pulling these best practices together to describe a model unit that could support “real” innovation (Sachs, 1984). The author of this chapter was also the director of ELI, so it is no surprise that the same best practices would eventually help ELI move into the college mainstream. In the sections that follow I summarize the principles underlying three parts of that model: plans and goals, organization and administration, and decision making. I describe how those principles worked to make ELI successful, and what new issues and challenges have emerged in light of that success.

Plans and Goals. The original model recognized that plans and goals were critical foundations for building a successful program. It recommended comprehensive planning with short- and long-range goals, alternatives for reaching those goals, benchmarks against which to measure accomplishments, and consideration of faculty and institutional readiness for innovation. It also noted the importance of improving instruction rather than encouraging the adoption of any one particular solution (Sachs, 1984).

ELI originally concentrated on developing large courses to quickly maximize distance learning enrollments. Today, as a mature program, ELI’s planning and goals are markedly different, often reflecting strategies to manage growth and guide difficult choices about where to spend resources, rather than how to attract new faculty and achieve large-scale growth. Furthermore, tools and technologies once used only in distance learning are now pervasive throughout the college. For example, there are currently more Blackboard course-management system accounts for students in traditional classes than in distance learning courses at ELI. This means that planning and goal setting have become more collaborative and involve greater coordination and negotiation among ELI, traditional academic

departments, college information technology staff, and a wide array of support services.

Planning for faculty involvement is also different now that ELI is a mature program. Originally, ELI's faculty was among the most innovative in the college. Their numbers were small and they shared a special bond with each other. Today, with more than eighty faculty, many of whom have been teaching distance learning courses for over a decade, ELI's faculty roster includes both those who are ready for and those resistant to change. There are those who are no longer innovative and who resist any departure from the way things have always been done. At the other end of the spectrum, there are those who are impatient with the pace of implementing new technology now that ELI's size sometimes makes it more difficult to move from one technology to another. This situation is not unique. Terry O'Banion, former executive director of the League for Innovation in the Community College, wrote about the same problem ten years ago: "Sadly, some colleges that were highly innovative in the '60s and '70s have lost that innovative spirit today" (1994, p. 1). ELI's distance learning program is no longer unique as a primary community of innovators; faculty teaching traditional classes use the same instructional tools and wrestle with many of the same student issues. Thus, ELI's planning challenges are now much more similar to those faced by the college as a whole as it tries to keep from growing stale, maintain a strong sense of community among its faculty, and support continued innovation.

Perhaps an even more fundamental change for ELI as a mature program, however, involves choosing appropriate distance learning goals. The importance of this issue cannot be overemphasized, and it comes up again and again in the literature (Compore, 2003; Gross, Gross, and Pirkl, 1998; Levine, Gallagher, Boccuti, and Meyer, 1992; Levy, 2003). Today, planning for distance learning must balance the following goals: using distance learning to solve capacity problems because there are not enough seats in traditional classrooms, increasing distance learning enrollments from outside Northern Virginia to help the college with the state's enrollment-driven funding model, and using distance learning technologies to improve the efficiency of traditional instruction. The choice of goals affects course selection, types of students served, support services required, costs, and even traditional, on-campus class offerings. For ELI, the goal is no longer to grow for growth's sake, and the decisions are no longer ELI's to make alone because each decision has an impact on the rest of the college. This situation is a far cry from the relative independence ELI had in its early years.

Organization and Administration. Although the original model for supporting innovation came after ELI was established in 1975, it identified key organizational and administrative factors that helped ELI ultimately become successful. The model recognized the importance of formal rather than ad hoc status, a full-time staff of well-trained professionals, and administrative independence. It recognized the need for discretionary resources

to support innovative projects and for a budget based on hard money. The model also noted the need for formal and informal ties to academic and governance committees to ensure communication and to give faculty a feeling of ownership and connection to the unit (Sachs, 1984).

ELI was created as a separate unit with a high degree of independence, so every decision did not require multiple layers of approval. ELI's director initially reported directly to the president of NVCC. There was a full-time staff and a budget based on the same hard-money formula that supported other college units, so funding was secure and predictable. ELI staff members sat on committees, which helped legitimize distance learning and create important informal and formal communication channels. All of this was consistent with organizational characteristics considered important for success.

These same relationships are still important—even taken for granted. Meanwhile, a new set of issues has emerged over the past several years that challenge many of the assumptions about ELI's relationship with the larger institution. Barone, vice president of EDUCAUSE, writes about how new technologies affect teaching, learning, and the traditional institutional structures (Barone, 2003). She is far from alone in wrestling with the problem of how nontraditional programs like ELI should fit inside college structures that were developed when chalk was the dominant technology. Similarly, Muilenburg and Berge (2001) identify administrative structure and organizational change as primary barriers to distance learning. Levy's (2003) literature review also illustrates the complexity of issues involved in distance learning organizational structure and administrative procedures. Also, in a monograph commissioned by the American Council on Education (ACE) and EDUCAUSE, Oblinger, Barone, and Hawkins (2001) express concern about the “daunting” (p. 14) governance issues facing colleges and universities, and question whether existing models can react quickly enough, provide sufficient independence, and ensure integration.

Distance learning administrators are not the only ones concerned with organizational issues. In an article in *Business Officer*, Duin and others (2002) describe three basic organizational approaches to distance learning: adding bolt-on programs and new services to traditional units in order to support initiatives by innovative faculty (for example, adding support for Blackboard through the IT department), embedding programs in various units to transform the institution slowly and deliberately from within (such as adding instructional developers to traditional academic departments), and creating spin-off programs outside traditional institutional structures to establish a new culture with new incentives (for example, creating a separate distance learning unit).

ELI is an example of the spin-off approach. A number of authors have concluded that this tactic, although often unpopular among traditional units of the institution, may have significant advantages over other distance learning organizational structures (Duin and others, 2002; Heterick, Mingle, and Twigg, 1998; Hitt and Hartman, 2002; Oblinger, Barone, and Hawkins, 2001).

Ultimately, it is often the senior administrators who must structure distance learning to fit their own style and concepts of the way things should be run. As Hitt and Hartman (2002) put it, “Distributed learning initiatives require a change in leadership role and a different leadership style” (p. 9). Ward, president of ACE, and Hawkins, president of EDUCAUSE, sum it up well by pointing out that the practice of senior administrators staying out of technology discussions worked well during the “pioneering phase” (Ward and Hawkins, 2003, p. 39). However, now that technology is so central and strategic to the institution, presidents and other administrators must become engaged and involved in technology decision making.

ELI has not been immune to these challenges; its organizational placement inside the college has changed several times since it was created. Today, distance learning, technology training, application support, college technology planning, the college’s technology help desk, as well as management of the college’s Web site, maintenance of the college’s technology infrastructure, and management of the college’s servers are part of a unit that reports to a vice president of instructional and information technology. This organizational structure creates a synergy by keeping all technology support units together, although some faculty and academic administrators continue to feel strongly that the distance learning program should be housed directly under the academic administration. They want more control of the distance learning agenda and resources, but there is no agreement on exactly how that should be done. This tension often leads to internal debates far more complex than envisioned in ELI’s earlier model.

Decision Making. ELI’s original model recognized that just putting the right teams together would not be sufficient to support meaningful innovation; the actual decision-making process would also be important. The model recommended that projects be initiated by faculty with regular input from administration and faculty leaders to make sure the unit was in tune with the institution. It went on to recommend that the unit employ a flexible approach that is sensitive to faculty and institutional needs, that faculty participate in project decision making, and that written records of meetings, decisions, and agreements be kept (Sachs, 1984, p. 7).

ELI learned early on that allowing the college’s full-time faculty to play a major role in distance learning course decision making was crucial to success. Most of these decisions centered on course design and use of instructional materials. Although both faculty and administrative input continue to be important today, the dynamic is different from when distance learning was still considered very innovative. In the early years, ELI was eager to support any interested faculty member, often playing the salesperson role with administrators to gain permission for a faculty member to develop and offer a distance learning course. Today, there are frequently more requests to support distance learning initiatives, venture into new technologies, or try bold new approaches than can readily be supported—at least all at once. This requires juggling resources to provide a consistent level of support

while at the same time encouraging creativity and innovation. Beaudoin (2003) points out that the roles of “advocate, reformer, and technician” are becoming less critical in distance learning leadership, whereas the roles of “conceptualizer, implementer, and evaluator” remain as important as before (p. 12).

Another aspect of decision making not really envisioned in the original model is how well traditional college committee structures deal with technology and distance learning issues. Duderstadt, Atkins, and Van Houweling (2003) note that many of the faculty and administrators serving on these committees lack the technical knowledge and experience necessary to make truly informed decisions about distance learning. They further observe that many committee members are highly protective of the status quo or overly cautious at a time when technology is forcing responses at rates unprecedented in higher education. Yet “to be competitive and successful, distributed education will require a governance model with a level of dynamism and flexibility dramatically different from traditional faculty governance models” (Oblinger, Barone, and Hawkins, 2001, p. 13). Where once ELI could respond quickly to changes and opportunities, now it is often caught—sometimes by its own faculty—in a web that belies its innovative traditions. At ELI the solution, though imperfect, has been to actively form new alliances and partnerships in the college and to initiate more pilot projects than when it was newly established. These strategies tend to satisfy the various committees more than the strength of the projects themselves.

Involving faculty in decision making also raises other significant issues concerning intellectual property rights and ownership of distance learning courses. As opposed to questions of copyright or fair use in the production of materials—issues ELI dealt with during the early growth years—today’s challenges center on who owns the distance learning courses developed and taught by individual faculty members but offered through ELI. Ownership was not originally a big problem for ELI because most faculty based their classes on telecourses licensed from commercial sources like the Adult Learning Service of the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), televised lectures produced by the college’s own television center, or commercially available textbooks and study guides. Now that many faculty produce online courses and course materials on their own PCs, ownership and property right issues have become less straightforward. The number of people writing about this subject is testament to its importance and complexity; the best advice has been to establish ownership up front (Gross, Gross, and Pirkl, 1998; Southern Regional Education Board, 2001; Levine and Sun, 2002; Levy, 2003).

For ELI, however, the issue is more complex than simply establishing ownership up front. For example, what constitutes a course in the online environment? Is a basic syllabus or a Blackboard site with posted assignments and discussion topics really of sufficient weight to be a course? At what point can a faculty member prevent another from using course material without permission? And when should input from an instructional developer be

considered so significant that the faculty member is no longer the sole author of the material? There have been a number of cases when the advice of an instructional developer turned a faculty member's ideas into something truly valuable and worth owning, but it is difficult to quantify that advice and protect both faculty and college interests. In addition, there is the question of what constitutes fair compensation when ELI wants to use course materials that belong to a professor; the true market value is often far less than what the instructor assumes. To deal with these issues, ELI developed a policy describing the kinds of materials a faculty member can own (a simple syllabus or Blackboard site do not qualify), the conditions under which ELI will pay to use them, and the ways in which conflicts will be resolved (Extended Learning Institute, 2003).

A Work in Progress

When ELI was established, it focused on surviving and building enrollments; little thought was given to what would happen when success made it part of the mainstream. Even the model that outlined critical success factors for supporting innovation ignored the long-term issues, and with the passage of time and changes in staff, the original model was forgotten. The principles that led ELI to early success remain important, however, and many of them have made their way into formal and informal policies, procedures, and traditions. Nonetheless, new issues have emerged that require different strategies and different approaches. Unlike the original set of best practices, there is far less agreement on the best responses to these new challenges. Ironically, ELI again finds itself in uncharted waters—just as it did when it was a distance learning pioneer in the 1970s. So although ELI has made it to the mainstream, it remains a work in progress.

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