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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Models of Administration for Online Learning Programs in the U.S. Higher Education Institutions

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This study investigated the models of administration for online learning programs in 85 higher education institutions in the United States. Data used in this study were collected from an online survey with 85 participants who were either staff members or administrators of online learning programs in their institutions of higher education. The results indicated that there were two administration models that higher education institutions used to administrate their online learning programs. The Centralized Administration (CA) model was more common than the Decentralized Administration (DA) model. According to participants, the online learning programs under the CA model tended to be stronger than the programs under the DA model. The paper provides recommendations for future studies related to the administration of online learning programs.

Keywords: online learning; higher education administration; education administration

In recent years, higher education has observed a significant rise in online learning opportunities for students. Allen and Seaman (2013, 2014) reported that online learning enrollment in higher education far exceeded the growth of traditional or face-to-face learning overall enrollment in the last few years. However, there are certainly differences in how online learning programs in higher education were created. Online programs have also varied in their ability to deliver courses where students are able to successfully complete the desired learning. Some programs are more successful than others. Many researchers (McLean, 2005; Meyer & Barefield, 2010; Thompson, 2003; Vu & Fadde, 2013) have pointed out that a well-established online program does not develop by accident. Success is the result of careful and purposeful processes involving technology selection, courseware design and delivery, updating obsolete policies, promotion and acceptance of a paradigm shift related to pedagogy, faculty and staff professional development, faculty workload, faculty technology competencies, and removal of institutional barriers to the development of synergistic teamwork and interdisciplinary cooperation (Meyer & Barefield, 2010).

According to Burnette (2015), "A paucity of empirical data on online education leadership exists in the literature" (p. 15). Beaudoin (2002) defined leadership in distance education as "a set of attitudes and behaviors that create conditions for innovative change, that

enable individuals and organizations to share a vision and move in its direction, and that contribute to the management and operationalization of ideas" (p. 132). Beaudoin (2002) also theorized we should identify any particular leadership style as the most suitable for distance education. On complex technological options, he also emphasized the distance education leader must always maintain the essential role of educator no matter what other roles the leader may assume. Beaudoin (2015) stated, "we still cannot claim to have in place a widely accepted competency model for distance education leaders working in highly transient settings driven by technology" (p. 43). So, while there may be defined characteristics of effective distance education or online leaders, there is a lack of research on models of online program administration in higher education settings.

There is a body of literature focusing on the factors affecting the success of online learning programs. These factors included instructors' technology competencies (Bhuasiri, Xaymoungkhoun, Zo, Rho, & Ciganek, 2012; Kang & Im, 2013; Mbati & Minnaar, 2015), learners' readiness and technology competence (Kuo, Walker, Belland & Schroder, 2013), existing infrastructures designed for the online student, such as student recruiting, admissions, academic counseling, registration, financial aid, and other student services (Mbati & Minnaar, 2015; Restauri, 2004; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). Additionally, administrative support, including assistance in the form of funding, guidance, oversight, and assistance in removing obstacles that hinder a healthy and well-supported online education program are helpful to the success of online learning programs (Ryan, Hodson-Carlton, & Ali, 2005; Travis & Rutherford, 2012; Yang, 2010). Nworie (2012) suggested that distance education leaders must be problem solvers and embrace a variety of leadership skills. In addition, according to Nworie (2012), effective leadership requires the leader to understand, engage, and care for followers as well as enabling those followers to maximize their contributions. Quite different from the above view, Beaudoin (2015) argued that there was not a specific list to competencies for leaders of distance or online educational programs in higher education. However, he found that the following competencies should merit special consideration when determining the attributes of effective leaders for online and distance education programs in higher education. These competencies include the following:

> Accurately diagnosing situations and devising appropriate strategies
> Ability to create conditions for innovation via a transformative leadership style
> Maintaining resilience and perspective in times of glacial or precipitous change
> Commitment to prepare the next generation of distance educators (pp. 41- 42)

While critical competencies have been developed, there is not a widely accepted model for leaders in distance or online education administration. Beaudoin (2015) offered two options for determining the competencies that might be considered as essential for leaders. The options include the use of International Board of Standards for Training, Performance and Instruction online learner competencies (Beaudoin et al., 2013) and the adoption a situational leadership model where leaders are able to adapt their leadership style to the setting and adjust their style as conditions may change.

In this study, the researchers examined an aspect of administrative leadership that may significantly affect the quality of an online learning program in higher education: the models of online learning program administration. Specifically, the researchers endeavored to answer the following questions:

1. What is the most common model of online learning program administration in U.S. higher education?
2. What do people, including staff and administrators who are involved in the online learning programs, think about their own institution's program administration model?
3. Which model of online learning program administration tends to be more effective?

RESEARCH METHOD

Data used in this study were collected from an online survey with 85 participants from 85 higher education institutions in the United States. These participants were either staff members or administrators of online learning programs in their institutions. The researchers reached them through an alumni network of the Institute for Emerging Leadership in Online Learning (IELOL), a leadership development program sponsored by Penn State University and the Online Learning Consortium. According to the information released on the IELOL website, each year, IELOL admitted approximately 40 participants into its program designed to serve the leadership development needs of professionals in the rapidly expanding field of online learning. The researchers did not know the exact number of members in the network but after two weeks of sending out our research invitation, there were 85 participants responding to the survey. The survey had six statements and questions asking for the participants' institution information such as their institution size and perception about the online learning program at their institution. To ensure the content validity of the survey, three independent instructional designers who were working in the online learning programs were asked to review the content to confirm the match between the survey statements and the content we attempted to collect. Data analysis involved both quantitative and qualitative data collected from the survey. For the quantitative data, two basic descriptive statistics of frequencies and percentages were used to count how many times the same responses were made to one particular category. For instance, in the first item of the survey, participants were asked to identify their institution size by selecting nine existing options. The frequencies informed the researchers what option was the most common. For the qualitative data, NVIVO 10 was used to identify the "most frequent words" in the participants' responses to the open-ended question. According to Welsh (2002), using NVIVO in qualitative data analysis could add rigor to the process by allowing the researchers to carry out accurate searches of a particular type, and also add to the validity of the results by ensuring that all instances of a particular usage are identified. Participants' responses to our open-ended question were stored in a spreadsheet and uploaded into NVIVO to conduct a basic analysis of identifying the "most frequent words". However, the researchers did not attempt to use advanced features in NVIVO to continue analyzing the data because, as noticed by Welsh, the qualitative data analysis process needed to be married with manual scrutiny techniques so that data were in fact thoroughly interrogated. In addition, since the amount of qualitative data collected in this study was not significantly large, the researchers wanted to manually conduct the coding and theme analysis to truly understand a broader picture of the data.

FINDINGS

Research question 1. What is the most common model of online learning program administration in U.S. higher education?

To find the answer to this research question, participants were first asked to identify their university size. A standard measure of student population introduced by the U.S News and World Reports (2015) was used to classify university sizes. For instance, an institution with less than 5,000 students is considered a small one. Participants were then asked to select the statement that best describes their online learning program at their institution. The data revealed that 52 out of 85 participants (61.18%) indicated their institution had one office or department that was in charge of everything related to online learning. This office reported directly to the vice chancellor, chancellor or president's office. Thirty-three out of 85 participants (38.82%) responded that their institution had many online learning units or offices within its colleges, and those offices reported directly to the college's deans. The researchers found that all of 35 public and private mid-size universities (around 7,000 students), and four private small universities (less than 5,000 students) in this study had one office or department in charge of everything related to online learning. This office reported directly to the vice chancellor, chancellor or president's office. However, forty-six public and private large universities (over 15,000 students) in this study used different models to administer their online learning programs. Thirty-three universities were reported to have many online learning departments or offices within its colleges, and those offices reported directly to the college's deans, while 13 universities were reported to have one office or department in charge of everything related to online learning.

TABLE 1
Percentages of Administration Models in Online Learning Programs

No	Description	Percentages
1	Centralized Administration	61.18% (52/85)
2	Decentralized Administration	38.82% (33/85)

In summary, as indicated by the data, there were two administration models that higher education institutions used to administer their online learning programs. The researchers named the first model “Centralized Administration” in which the institution had one office or department in charge of everything related to online learning. This office reported directly to the vice chancellor, chancellor or president's office at the institution. The second model was “Decentralized Administration” in which the institution had many online learning departments or offices within its colleges, and those offices reported directly to the college's deans. The Centralized Administration model tended to be more common than the Decentralized Administration model. This is especially true of public or private mid-size or small universities where online learning programs were administered using the Centralized Administration model. The Decentralized Administration model was more common in public or private large universities.

Research Question 2: Which model tends to be more effective?

The answer to this research question was based on the results of three survey statements. The purpose of including three statements into this research question is to triangulate and validate research participants' responses. According to Maxwell (2005), the triangulation process of collecting information reduced the risk that conclusions would reflect systematic biases and allowed a broader understanding of the study's issues. The comparison of participants' responses gathered supported the triangulation process and therefore enhanced internal validity.

In the first survey statement, participants were asked to self-grade their online learning program at their own institution. In the second statement, they were asked to compare their online learning program with that of a peer or a neighboring higher education institution. In the last statement, participants were asked for their own attitudes toward the online learning program. According to the data, the Centralized Administration model (CA) tended to be more effective than the Decentralized Administration model (DA). Specifically, in the self-grading statement, the CA model earned 4.25 out of 5.00 while the DA model earned 3.15 out of 5.00. According to the research participants, most CA-based online learning programs also tended to be stronger than that of their peers or neighboring higher education institutions, while most DA-based online programs were not confident that their programs were stronger than their peers' programs. Additionally, people in institutions using a CA model tended to be more satisfied with their online learning program than those using the DA model.

Research question 3. What do people, including staff and administrators, who are involved in the online learning programs think about their own program administration model at their institution?

The answer to this research question was based on an open-ended question in the survey. The data analysis for this research question consisted of examining and categorizing responses to address the purpose of the study. We used NVIVO 10 to identify the "most frequent words" in the participants' responses to our open-ended question. The researchers then manually conducted the process of coding and theme analysis. The whole analysis process did not always proceed in a linear manner but it was an ongoing search for general statements about relationships between categories of data. Themes that emerged from the coding were compared to data observations in an effort to recognize patterns.

Four main themes emerged from the participants' responses that included: faculty's competence and acceptance, high-level administration support, staffing issues, and quality assurance. We noticed that both the CA and DA models raised these four concerns to help improve their current online learning programs. Among the four concerns, high-level administration support was the most common. The high-level administration support identified by the participants was diverse, ranging from "*Provide leadership and vision for the institutional direction regarding the role of online learning at the institutional level*", "*Higher pay for qualified online faculty*", to "*Develop and articulate an institutional strategy for online learning. Hire a senior level (Assoc. Provost) for Online and Digital Learning."*

DISCUSSION

There were two administration models that higher education institutions used to administer their online learning programs: the Centralized Administration model and the Decentralized Administration model. The former tended to be more common than the latter. This is especially true to public and private mid-size or small universities where online learning programs were administered using a Centralized Administration model. The Decentralized Administration model was more common in large public and private universities.

Larger university systems tended to implement the Decentralized Administration, despite its possible limitations. According to Szatmary (2011), the familiarity of the Decentralized Administration model provides a level of comfort knowing that decisions will ultimately be determined by the president of the university with the input of the individual colleges and/or departments. Additionally, this model provides the ability to develop a divide and conquer hierarchy monitoring specific areas of the system. The Decentralized Model also allows for leaders to apply situational leadership skills and maximize the contributions of others in the organization (Beaudoin et al., 2013; Nworie, 2012). Ultimately, all lower reports using a Decentralized Administration model report their findings to university leadership such as the university president or provost.

In the second research question, the researchers found that the Centralized Administration model tended to be more effective than the Decentralized Administrative model as perceived by the study's participants. The Centralized Administrative model is a more streamlined approach, which expedites decision-making and the implementation of programs. This model also provides for more consistency across the institution. Under this model, college administrators and leaders who have knowledge of the programs offered and the needs of their online students provide the input to the decision makers. While input and feedback from others may be taken into consideration by the university leadership, the final decisions, are ultimately made by the university president or provost.

Finally, faculty's competence and acceptance, high-level administrative support, staffing issues, and quality assurance were four main concerns that participants raised about their online learning programs. These issues are in line with what has been reported in the literature regarding critical factors affecting the success of an online learning program (Bhuasiri, Xaymoungkhoun, Zo, Rho, & Ciganek, 2012; Kang & Im, 2013; Kuo, Walker, Belland, & Schroder, 2013; Mbati & Minnaar, 2015; Meyer & Barefield, 2010; Restauri, 2004; Ryan, Hodson-Carlton, & Ali, 2005; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006; Travis & Rutherford, 2012; Yang, 2012).

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Survey participants in CA models graded their programs much higher than respondents working in DA models. In addition, participants in CA models were more satisfied with their programs than those in DA models. CA models certainly provide more consistency and efficiency in programing, professional development, staffing, budgeting, decision- making, etc., but generally tend to be more top-down in their administration of the program. DA models tend to be less consistent and efficient in programming, professional development, staffing, budgeting, decision making, etc., as decisions are made in a number of offices instead of one centralized office.

From respondents in this study, it appears that the consistency and efficiency of the CA model is more effective in developing a strong online program. The CA model has advantages in maintaining consistency in the themes identified by the survey participants: faculty's competence and acceptance, high-level administration support, staffing issues, and quality assurance. While it is possible to achieve these outcomes in a DA model, there may also be discrepancies in how online programs are administered and supported between colleges and departments.

Colleges and universities need to plan and devote appropriate resources in order to develop quality online programs where students are able to demonstrate success. This will not happen without high-level administrative support, no matter the administration model. Consistency in developing faculty competence, staffing, and quality assurance are concerns identified in the literature and this study. Whatever model, CA or DA, is used, these concerns need to be addressed by the institution. In addition, further study needs to be focused on how decisions are being made regarding online learning programs. Are decision makers considering feedback from online students and teachers? Is there a difference in student' success between schools using a CA model as compared to a DA model? These are important questions to consider as institutions of higher education strive to increase the quality of online programs and require further study.

LIMITATIONS

The findings must be considered in the context of the limitations of this study. First, a convenience nonrandom sampling method was used to select participants, and as a result, the sample may not be representative of the entire population under study. In addition, participants volunteered to complete our survey. Volunteerism may have introduced bias into the study and skewed the results one way or another. Future studies on this topic may want to use a random sampling technique to reduce bias.

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