

Leadership's Role in Support of Online Academic Programs: Implementing an Administrative Support Matrix

by Amanda C. Barefield, EdD, RHIA, LNHA, and John D. Meyer, PhD

Abstract

The proliferation of online education programs creates a myriad of challenges for those charged with implementation and delivery of these programs. Although creating and sustaining quality education is a shared responsibility of faculty, staff, and academic leaders, this article focuses on the pivotal role of leadership in securing the necessary resources, developing the organizational structures, and influencing organizational culture. The vital foundation for a successful outcome when implementing online education programs is the role of leadership in providing adequate and appropriate support. Abundant literature extols the roles of leadership in project management; however, there is a dearth of models or systematic methods for leaders to follow regarding how to implement and sustain online programs. Research conducted by the authors culminated in the development of an Administrative Support Matrix, thus addressing the current gap in the literature.

Keywords: online teaching, faculty support, leadership, e-learning

Introduction

Enrollment in online courses in the United States has outgrown the pace of enrollment in traditional classroom courses. Redpath noted in 2009 that “almost one-third of higher education students in the United States were enrolled in at least one online course.”¹ This enrollment trend has continued to increase, even during the recent economic downturn.

The majority of current students are heavy technology users. The acceptance and popularity of online communication and social networking is driving this trend. In turn, higher education institutions need to be responsive to both internal and external changes influenced by technological advances.² However, the procurement of leading-edge technology is merely the beginning of a journey toward the delivery of online education. Mere access to technology is insufficient in ensuring project success. Faculty and students require appropriate administrative support before, during, and after the implementation of new technology.

A cohesive support structure begins with leaders promoting a synergistic environment conducive to technology adoption. Bruner found significant deterrents to adoption of technology that he labels the “hassle factor.”³ His studies confirmed that the added workload, lack of release time, lack of training, lack of real incentives, and frequent frustrations with technology all came together to build a barrier that he considered the number one reason faculty avoid online education. His advice to administrators: focus more attention on removing each of the issues and create a less threatening work environment. Underscoring the significance of leadership's impact on the success or failure rate of online education (or

adoption of new technology) is Frith and Kee's finding that many faculty blame the loss of students on the instability of the infrastructure and the inability of campus support personnel to work through issues that subsequently drive away online students.⁴

Current literature identifies the roles of leadership in technology implementation, but little is provided in terms of models or systematic methods that leaders can adopt to improve the organizational resources, structures, and culture necessary for successful technology adoption.⁵ This gap is especially true for technology adoption in the academic setting. In this article the authors expand the available literature by suggesting the use of the Administrative Support Matrix (ASM). The ASM (see Table 1) identifies processes and elements essential to developing and sustaining online educational programs.

Overview of the Literature

The literature examines three differing but commingled perspectives that provide deeper insight into the needs of faculty and students in the online teaching environment. These perspectives include (1) faculty training needs, (2) administrative support needs, and (3) faculty perceptions of how well needs are being met by the institution. These perspectives inform leaders regarding the actions they should take to secure resources, develop structures, and influence culture.

Levy noted that higher education leaders identify developing and communicating a vision as one of their biggest challenges.⁶ Nonetheless, a key factor in the success of an online program is its inclusion as a priority in the institution's strategic plan. To ensure that all necessary elements are adequately addressed, the development and implementation of online programs should receive the same level of attention that leaders provide to other strategic priorities.⁷ To do less makes the effort an afterthought fraught with missing resources, inadequate structures, and a counterproductive organizational culture.

A study by Abel identified potential denominators for success in implementing online programs.⁸ The two ingredients that ranked most important were *executive leadership and support* and *faculty and academic leadership commitment*. The study also identified the following leadership elements in successful online programs:

- A long-term commitment to the initiative,
- Investment of significant financial and other resources,
- Prioritization of expenditures on high-impact programs, and
- A clear understanding by faculty of why the institution is implementing the online program.⁹

As a result of this study, the author concluded that "the involvement of key leaders in prioritizing when to focus on online learning development activities was critical and highly correlated with perceived success" of online programs.¹⁰

Similar to the need for involvement of leadership is the need for faculty support of the online program. Fusch stated that faculty need to be involved early in the process. Fusch quoted an administrator who noted that in a comparison of successful and unsuccessful programs, it was determined that the "common missing piece in all" of the failed attempts "was that faculty were not at the table during the early planning[,] . . . [leading] to intensified skepticism."¹¹ The author noted that institutions implementing an online program or expanding a current online program were successful when the leadership prepared, informed, and involved the faculty.¹²

It should come as no surprise that nontraditional delivery of education, such as online education, frequently requires faculty to take on nontraditional roles; this "ripple effect" is commonplace in any major system change. Unfortunately, leaders all too frequently misidentify or fail to identify this effect. For example, Restauri laments that online faculty must often become the instructional designer, technology specialist, and administrative advisor because they are the first line of contact for all distance students.¹³ Faculty who teach online often find themselves forced to fill in as substitutes for administrative services such as student recruitment, admissions, academic counseling, registration, and financial aid because the existing administrative support departments are often ill-equipped to handle the

distance student. These roles, and their impact on variables such as faculty training needs and workload, are frequently overlooked when administrators plan for an online education program. What is known is that the traditional administrative support roles must change to accommodate an online teaching environment. What is not known is exactly how they must change and what these changes should entail.¹⁴ Research conducted by Meyer and Barefield attempted to bridge this gap by focusing on the needs of faculty and the value of faculty feedback to leaders who make administrative decisions.¹⁵ The authors found that although the views of academic leaders are influenced by circumstances unique to their institution and their individual responsibilities within it, one unifying objective is compliance with external accreditation bodies.

Magjuka, Shi, and Bonk discuss the critical design and administrative concerns that were a vital part of the decision making process for what is now Indiana University's Kelley Direct (KD) online program.¹⁶ In the early stages of the planning process, KD administrators and planners searched the literature to find what other universities had done in similar situations. They found six elements or questions that could be posed for careful consideration by administrators when planning and developing an online teaching program. These elements included:

1. Vision—a focus on plans for the future
2. Curriculum—how the curriculum might change for the online environment
3. Administrative support services—what was needed to train the faculty, staff, and students and provide for continued support services
4. Student services—how student services needed to be modified for online support
5. Student support services—what kind of student training and support would be needed
6. Copyright and intellectual property—what kind of policies would be needed to address the question of copyright and intellectual property¹⁷

In addition to the six elements identified by Magjuka et al., 10 administrative concerns or issues were considered by Indiana University's KD online program. Figure 2 outlines these administrative concerns and issues.

These findings help to demonstrate that university systems, whether big or small and whether focusing on healthcare, liberal arts, or specialized content, all have similar issues to deal with when it comes to the planning, development, and assessment of online teaching programs. Interestingly, while some institutions started with the assumption that online programs are a quick and easy way to expand enrollment without expanding costly brick-and-mortar infrastructures, they soon realized that the increased workload on faculty and staff would have to be addressed. As noted earlier, while one will likely find differing points of view about how online education should be implemented and supported, compliance with accreditation standards is unavoidable if an institution wishes to maintain its accredited status. Regional academic accrediting bodies, such as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), have incorporated standards that address distance education courses and programs. Beyond their obvious purpose, these standards can be used by administrators as a baseline guide in establishing an online program or in strengthening one already in place.¹⁸ Figure 1 summarizes the SACS distance education policy statement; the 12 statements indicate the issues leaders must tackle to ensure that they are providing the necessary resources as well as a supportive organizational structure and culture.^{19, 20}

Administrative Support Matrix

The Administrative Support Matrix (see Table 1) developed by Meyer and Barefield provides a process that can be followed or modified to meet the needs of university systems that differ in size or objective.²¹ It is divided into three Supportive Infrastructure Stages:

1. Foundation (or initial) stage
2. Development stage
3. Maintenance (or continuance) stage

By dividing the elements into stages, the significance of each element is highlighted. Furthermore, the stages guide the sequence in which the elements should be considered to achieve optimal outcomes.

Foundation

The Foundation stage defines the infrastructure and procedural groundwork that should be in place before an online teaching program is begun. The seven elements in this stage need attention before an online teaching program is implemented. These elements are as follows:

- Administration's ability to listen and respond to faculty needs;
- A supporting and responsive information technology (IT) team;
- An effective and well-supported campus technology network;
- Effective server support;
- An online student registration, billing, and payment system;
- Online bookstore services; and
- Online library services.

In an undertaking of this magnitude, it is important that leaders develop a teamwork atmosphere between administration and faculty in order to secure buy-in and the full understanding and cooperation of the faculty.²² In order to create an effective and harmonious work environment for faculty who teach online, the IT department needs to serve a customer-oriented support role and be supportive and responsive to the immediate needs of the faculty.^{23, 24} Whether the leaders have fulfilled their role in providing the necessary resources, developing appropriate organizational structures, and influencing the culture quickly becomes apparent when faculty and IT staff begin interacting.

An online teaching program must rely heavily on the network infrastructure and campus servers to provide the needed connectivity to online students. These functions should provide 100 percent or very nearly 100 percent uptime in order to adequately support an online teaching program.^{25, 26} An online student registration, billing, and payment system, an online bookstore, and online library services are essential parts of the basic foundation needed to support an online teaching program. These online services should be well established in advance of the implementation of an online teaching program.²⁷

Development

The Development stage of the matrix outlines nine important elements that should be implemented during the development of an online program. These elements include the following:

- Online program policies,
- A staff development program,
- Faculty incentives,
- A teamwork approach,
- A faculty development program,
- A faculty mentoring program,
- A course management system,
- A lecture capture or course online delivery system, and
- Online test security.

Coordinated human activity rarely occurs by accident; it typically requires a plan of action to guide both independent and team-based work. Policies, procedures, rules, and job descriptions are examples of the types of plans that improve coordination. Developing, implementing, and maintaining distance learning programs is no exception to the general rule of thumb that written guidelines improve coordination and consequently improve outcomes. Existing guidelines should be reviewed in the early stages of online program development. Leaders should assess whether new guidelines need to be created and whether existing guidelines need to be modified to fit the new context of online programs. The

provision of monetary incentives for developing and teaching an online course, the approval process for adding online courses, and whether the operating expenses of online programs will be budgeted separately are examples of issues that should be determined sooner rather than later in the development of online programs.²⁸

Staff and faculty development is essential to the success and effectiveness of any online program. Several studies show that it is even better if faculty development classes can be offered online so that faculty can get a better feel for what the students will experience. An effective online training program must be preceded by a successful development program for both faculty and staff.²⁹

It is essential that leadership address the impact on faculty workload directly. Fusch states that proceeding with the development of online programs without planning for the impact on faculty workloads results in decreased faculty buy-in and effectiveness.³⁰ Leadership should define faculty workloads and expectations around time and compensation. An administrator quoted by Fusch warns that “online education doesn’t come with defined, finite faculty work hours.”³¹

Leadership can turn to successful programs such as Boston University’s effort. Their successful approach included compensating faculty for time spent converting classroom courses into online courses, linking funding support to revenue production, and providing increased funding support to the respective online programs.³²

Although incentives are helpful, a well-honed teamwork approach to the online teaching process can often be a sufficient incentive in itself.^{33–35} If staff and faculty feel they are part of an effective and well-organized team, they will often find satisfaction in that fact alone.

Faculty mentoring has been lauded as one of the more effective methods of helping faculty retain and apply what was learned in training sessions. Training that takes place without mentoring is quickly forgotten and refresher training is then required, but training that is followed by a mentoring program has proven very effective in the retention of training.^{36, 37}

Selection of a proper course management system (CMS) is another critical element of an online teaching program. Some common CMSs include WebCT, Blackboard, eCollege, Desire2Learn, ANGEL, and Moodle. Each CMS has unique features that may or may not be helpful or user friendly for a given institution, so each CMS should be carefully evaluated before launching an online teaching program.³⁸ Leaders should ensure that the end users—the faculty—have a voice in the selection of the tools they will use to deliver online education. When the end users are left out of the selection process, leaders run the risk of being viewed as disingenuous when extolling the importance of teamwork.

A lecture capture or course online delivery system may include Tegrity, Impatica, Camtasia, Elluminate, or Wimba. These products can augment the capabilities of a CMS to provide better student comprehension of online course content.^{39, 40} Online test security should also be a consideration in the development stage. How can tests be proctored or students monitored while taking a test online and at a distance? Tools that will restrict a student’s ability to cheat on tests are available, but these need to be carefully evaluated and sometimes require a steep learning curve.⁴¹

Maintenance

The Maintenance stage identifies processes and “housekeeping” elements that should be implemented to encourage a progressive online teaching program. This stage of the matrix is designed to sustain and improve a fine-tuned online teaching program. The tasks in this stage include the following:

- Continuously evaluate new online technology,
- Update technology only when new technology adds value,
- Periodically assess and update the quality of course content,
- Set limits on the intrusion of technology on online faculty personal time,
- Survey faculty semiannually,
- Survey students at end of every semester, and
- Make changes to programs based on faculty and student input.

The process of continuous quality improvement is just as important in an online education environment as it is with traditional course delivery. However, with online delivery, ensuring that the right technology is in place for the right reasons is an additional challenge in the task of maintaining and improving quality in online education. Updating technology only when the new technology adds value by improving delivery efficiency or student learning outcomes ensures that decisions to upgrade technology are made for good reasons, not just because it is “the latest and greatest.”⁴² One approach that helps to ensure that technology changes are driven by more than just availability is to assess the technology in light of curriculum changes (if any), course content revisions (if any), and student course evaluations.^{43, 44}

A factor that is often overlooked by leaders who are not familiar with the stresses and demands of online teaching is the intrusion on personal time. Without constraints, faculty could very easily become overwhelmed from the 24/7 demands on their time. Policies should be carefully designed to take this factor into account and should build in faculty release time and downtime to recuperate and regenerate. Poor leadership in this area can result in the loss of valuable faculty members at a very high cost to the institution.⁴⁵

Surveying faculty and students at predetermined intervals is essential in maintaining a flow of information between the administration, faculty, and students. Faculty and student surveys are a good way for administrators to stay ahead of the game and keep abreast of trends and changes that may be needed.⁴⁶ Along with frequent surveys it is important that administration make changes to programs based on the faculty and student input. Surveys are great, but they have little effect if they are not used to make positive changes to the curriculum, the technology, and the support structure for an online teaching program. The feedback from faculty and students should be carefully evaluated, and changes should be made when possible and feasible.⁴⁷

Summary

Leadership’s role in providing adequate and appropriate support is key to the success of implementing a new online program or revamping an existing online program. The Administrative Support Matrix provides a systematic method for leaders to consider when implementing an online teaching program.

Leaders need to secure necessary resources for online programs. The Foundation phase of the matrix ensures that sufficient infrastructure and support functions are in place to support the implementation of an online training program. Leaders also need to develop the necessary organizational structures and influence the organizational culture to ensure a successful online program. The Development phase of the matrix is designed to ensure that all the pieces of the infrastructure critical to the development of an online program are either in place or developed and that current infrastructure elements are realigned or restructured to include support for an online teaching program. The Maintenance phase of the matrix outlines a continuous process of development and upkeep to ensure that the online program does not stagnate, suffer outdated technology, or lose touch with the needs of faculty and students. This process can be modified to meet the unique needs of a variety of educational entities.

Leaders at all levels of administration need to be mindful that while online programs provide significant growth potential with little need for added physical space, careful consideration needs to be given to the faculty and student support structure in order to achieve maximum effectiveness. Online learning environments differ significantly from their brick-and-mortar cousins and therefore require additional planning to ensure success. Leaders can assist the institution in growing successfully by carefully designing and implementing the support structure before instituting a new online program.

Amanda C. Barefield, EdD, RHIA, LNHA, is an associate professor in the Department of Health Informatics at Georgia Health Sciences University in Augusta, GA.

John D. Meyer, PhD, is an associate director of instructional technology at the Florida Institute of Technology in Melbourne, FL.

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Table 1

Administrative Support Matrix

Foundation Stage	Development Stage	Maintenance Stage
1. Administration's ability to listen and respond to faculty needs	1. Online program policies	1. Continuously evaluate new online technology
2. A supporting and responsive information technology (IT) team	2. Staff development program	2. Update technology only when new technology adds value
3. Effective and well-supported campus network	3. Faculty incentives	3. Periodically assess and update quality of course content
4. Effective server support	4. Teamwork approach	4. Set limits on intrusion of technology on online faculty personal time
5. Online student registration, billing, and payment system	5. Faculty development program	5. Survey faculty semiannually
6. Online bookstore services	6. Faculty mentoring program	6. Survey students at end of every semester
7. Online library services	7. Course management system	7. Make changes to programs based on faculty and student input
	8. Lecture capture or course online delivery system	
	9. Online test security	

Source: Meyer, J. D., and A. C. Barefield. *Developing and Sustaining Online Education: An Administrator's Guide to Developing an Online Teaching Program*. Cologne: LAP Academic Publishing, 2009.

Figure 1

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) Distance Education Policy Statement (Summary)

1. Education must include appropriate interactions between students and faculty and between students.
2. Ensuring that the technology is adequate to support the online or distance education effort demands quality equipment to support the endeavor.
3. The administration must develop policies that cover faculty compensation and copyright issues to ensure that everyone understands what is expected and how the process will be governed.
4. Ensuring that faculty are sufficiently supported in the distance education process demands that specific support factors be put into place before an online or distance education program is implemented.
5. Adequate training must be provided to faculty who teach online and distance education programs to ensure that faculty receive the training they need before implementing an online or distance education program.
6. Ensuring that distance and online education programs are sufficiently compatible with campus-based programs is essential in maintaining credibility as well as accreditation.
7. Library resources must be readily accessible to online and distance students not only for accreditation but as an essential part of the teaching process.
8. Ensuring that distance and online students have adequate access to laboratories and other required equipment and facilities is also required by SACS.
9. Administrators must ensure that administrative services such as admissions, financial aid, academic advising, access to mandatory course materials, and placement or counseling services are all provided and accessible to the online or distance student and that access is equivalent to that of campus students.
10. With regard to technology, SACS also requires that the online or distance technology used by the institution be usable by the student, and that students can gain access to the equipment necessary to use the technology.
11. The requirement for appropriate equipment and the expertise to operate the equipment requires reliable server support and a customer-oriented information technology (IT) service department.
12. Finally, SACS requires that administrators conduct long-range planning and develop budgets, policies, and processes needed to effectively provide the staffing, equipment, and other resources essential to the implementation of a distance or online education program.

Sources: Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. *Distance and Correspondence Education Policy Statement*.

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Figure 2

Critical Design and Administrative Concerns in Developing an Online Program

- 1.** Which student group (current, new, distant, campus, etc.) will be served by the online program?
- 2.** Will the online program be organized differently than current program(s)? Will online programs run parallel to existing programs or be treated separately from each other?
- 3.** Will the online program have a residential requirement?
- 4.** How will instructional needs be addressed, such as by using existing faculty, hiring adjunct faculty, or using a mix of part-time and full-time faculty?
- 5.** Should the program focus the design effort and funding on developing standardized course templates or provide training for existing faculty on the finer aspects of online pedagogy?
- 6.** Should any type of common course template (i.e., a common “look and feel”) be used to streamline or standardize the online instruction?
- 7.** How much interactivity should be designed into online courses, and how much of the interactivity should be left to the judgment of the individual faculty?
- 8.** Should the program use commercial off-the-shelf online technology, use open-source technology, or develop its own proprietary teaching tools?
- 9.** How should the program select a course management system that will best fit the goals and design of the curriculum to be placed online?
- 10.** What role will corporate partners and university alliances play in the design and implementation of an online teaching program?

Source: Magjuka, R. J., M. Shi, and C. J. Bonk. “Critical Design and Administrative Issues in Online Education.” *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration* 8, no. 4 (2005). Available at <http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/winter84/magjuka84.pdf> (accessed May 1, 2008).