CRITICAL ISSUES OF ONLINE LEARNING FACING MARKETING ADMINISTRATORS

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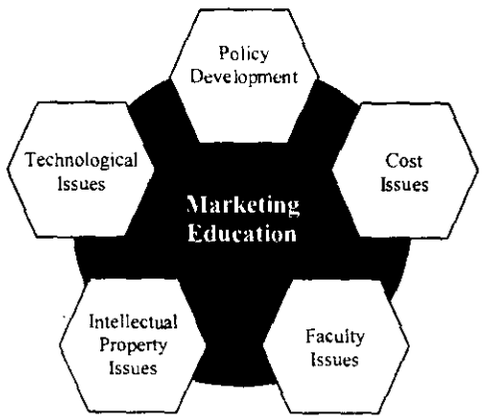
ABSTRACT

"The Marketing Educators' Association (MEA) is the premiere international organization for faculty development of the marketing professoriate. The organization's mission is to provide worldwide leadership in promoting the development and sharing of scholarship that enhances marketing education and advances marketing knowledge and practice." (www.marketingeducators.org, 2003). Indeed, the MEA facilitates discussion and debate, as well as disseminates research and information about those issues impacting marketing education. Leadership is a theme discussed often in the marketing academy. Many of our MEA members are recruited into leadership positions as department chairs and college deans to manage education. One area challenging the marketing or business education administrator is online learning. Distance education as a dynamic product and service has rapidly become part of the course offerings at many institutions. This paper presents five of the most critical issues facing marketing education leaders of online learning: 1) policy development, 2) cost issues, 3) faculty issues, 4) technological issues, and 5) intellectual property issues (See Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. Critical Issues Facing Teachers of Online Education



LEADERSHIP ISSUES CHALLENGING ADMINISTRATORS

Policy Development - Ability to Focus

The online learning environment in postsecondary education is indeed complicated to plan and manage. One of the 21 indispensable qualities of a leader as presented by Maxwell (1999) is the ability to focus. Developing policy for online learning challenges any leader's ability to focus on the overwhelming need for order within chaos. Although it would seem logical that policy development would be one of the first issues educators would explore, it is in reality one of the most often ignored until needed. Many faculty and departments diligently create online courses and offer them to students *before* creating or even understanding the policies that must be in place to support the electronic delivery of knowledge. Therein lies a quandary.

Policies provide a framework for operation; an agreed upon set of rules that explain to all participant their roles and responsibilities (Gellman-Danley & Fetzner, 1998). Without such a framework, the ultimate goal of teaching and learning may suffer as teachers struggle to defend old decisions and create new decisions based on failed methods.

The PAF model identifies for educators and administrators policy issues and particular activities within these issues that must be addressed in advance. The framework is a constructive and comprehensive means for thinking about and managing distance education programs and courses. The policy areas identify seven strategic management decision zones: academic, governance/administration/fiscal, faculty, legal, student support services, technical and cultural. An administrator could adopt the framework as a foundation for possible success in the initial offering of online courses or as a method to strategically plan for the growth of current online courses and programs. Developing a distance education policy presents a variety of issues and challenges. Most institutions need to examine a host of existing policies and revise as needed (American Council on Education, 2000).

The American Distance Education Consortium (2002) offers for creating policy the guiding principles for distance learning leaders. These guiding principles include challenging educators to design curriculum for the active and effective learner; supporting the non-curricular needs of the learners; developing and maintaining the technological and human support infrastructure; and sustaining administrative and organizational commitment. Many university and state systems have also created and promoted their own policy frameworks. For example, the Oregon University System has a draft version of *Distance Education Policy Guidelines 2001* available online at www.ous.edu/dist-learn/DEguidelines2001.htm.

As noted above, King et al. (2002) discuss areas or zones for strategic planning. The important leadership issues they explore fall within the policy framework – cost issues, faculty issues, technology issues, and copyright (legal) issues. It is important to note that policy creation and revision, although an umbrella which opens to cover at least seven other areas

within online learning, is a leadership issue within itself. The next issue to be discussed is cost.

Cost - Putting an End to Unsolved Mysteries

Another of the 21 indispensable qualities of a leader as listed by Maxwell (1999) is discernment – putting an end to unsolved mysteries. One can easily affirm that the expense of creating, distributing and evaluating online learning is most certainly an unsolved mystery, even to those successfully offering distance education courses. Bishop (2002) states, "Competing priorities for educational dollars and increasingly limited fiscal resources require institutions to identify, project, and control the costs associated with online learning" (p. 1). Many administrators and educators may not fully understand the impact of the costs of online learning.

Rumble (2001) explores the notion that each stakeholder has a different perspective of what constitutes costs. For example, the faculty member will want to know how teaching an online course affects her salary and teaching load; a student will want to know if her tuition will be higher or lower; and a provost will want to know whether additional technology fees should be charged. Unfortunately, adding to the confusion is the lack of standardized categories for distance learning costing terminology. Many categorize costs differently and use different terminology – from fixed to unfixed expenses; up-front to recurrent; development costs; training costs; support costs; material costs; break-even points; capital costs; revenue costs; labor costs. Costs need to be categorized (Morgan, 2000) but more importantly, categories for expenses need to be standardized. We need to understand as well that costs may be apparent (e.g. procurement of a networking server) to those costs that are obscured (e.g. increase in network traffic due to on-line class activity).

A significant element in costing is to comprehend the system being "costed" so that expense elements are not overlooked. In short, all costs must be analyzed completely. McCormack (1996) summed it up nicely by saying, "...in an effort to be truly cost effective, any blueprint for the implementation of a distance learning program must include system designs that analyze the user's educational requirements, incorporates and builds on past experiences with distance learning, and considers the capabilities as well as the limitations of the technologies employed in the process." (p. 116). Costing is paramount if educational leaders are to make the right decisions concerning online courses and programs.

For example, Taylor, Parker and Tebeaux (2001) reported that educational institutions have two major financial dilemmas concerning distance education, especially during a time when budgets are stretched. The first is how to provide financial support for faculty and teaching units preparing courses for distance education delivery, and the second is how to determine pricing strategies that must follow state-mandated guidelines while remaining cost-effective to university budgets. They propose a five-step costing model to determine and set pricing based on a model developed by the Texas A&M University: Cost per semester credit hour, administrative costs, price for non-state funded distance courses, other DE Costs (supplies, books, materials, etc), and fee distribution. It is important for us to understand that this is just one model of many available as a template for fiscal planning.

The most challenging aspect is finding a model that most accurately fits the institution and distance learning situation. An administrator may review five or ten case studies or working templates and still not identify one that best meets her needs. This is where the unsolved mystery of cost remains a leadership challenge. Another leadership challenge closely related to cost is that of faculty issues within distance learning.

Faculty Issues - To Get Ahead, Put Others First

Number three of the 21 indispensable qualities of a leader as listed by Maxwell (1999) is servant hood – to get ahead, put others first. Admittedly, some administrators and educators would balk at this declaration, however, in distance learning it is prudent to put the faculty first in many arenas of distance education. Most faculty, nonetheless, have not responded as quickly and enthusiastically to online learning as administrators would like. Yet, research has discovered that one of the factors highly correlated to student retention in the online environment is faculty performance (Murphy, 2000). Student success and satisfaction in distance education courses are directly associated to student interaction with instructors. There is also a generally accepted connection between student satisfaction with faculty conduct and student learning (Graham, Cagiltay, Lim, Craner, & Duffy, 2001). It is important to have faculty motivated, willing and trained to facilitate online courses.

To ensure that faculty can create a challenging, productive, and stimulating learning environment, especially online, Carlson (1999) finds that professors must first possess the proper credentials, content knowledge, and technical manipulation skills. Online faculty must demonstrate a high level of comfort working in a virtual, asynchronous environment. Trippe (2000) suggests faculty training before, during and continuously thereafter for all online faculty.

Research in the field of distance education has highlighted the need for a change and modification of the faculty role in teaching at a distance (Beaudoin, 1990). For example, Visser (2000) reports that distance education courses can require twice as much time and effort to design and facilitate than those of traditional format. Many studies cite faculty resistance to instructional technology as a primary barrier to the continued growth of distance education programs (Gunawardena, 1990; McNeil, 1990). Lindner, Murphy and Dooley (2001) found that tenure status and academic rank have an effect on the adoption rates of distance education models. Non-tenured, assistant professors had the highest distance education competency scores. Today, junior faculty are hired with the expectation that they will teach distance education courses and possess the self-efficacy and skills to integrate those technologies.

Faculty have specifically expressed concerns for the adequacy of institutional support, the change in interpersonal relations, and quality. For example, within the area of institutional

support are questions and concerns about salary; promotion and tenure; workload; and training. Distance education technologies create a major change in the way instruction is delivered. They require new skills for both the instructor and the student. The educational experience is shifted from teacher-centered to learner-centered. Instructors become facilitators, intermediaries between the students and the resources they need for their own independent study.

These changes challenge faculty and may trigger insecurities (Trippe, 2000). Approximately 60 percent of today's higher education faculty are over the age of 45, most having taught in the traditional classroom setting. To elicit faculty support and involvement, distance education leaders need to be skillful change agents, enticing faculty participation in online learning. Technology is also a leadership challenge within distance learning.

Technology - Courage to Navigate Technology
Administrators and educators are often naïve about is the technical aspects and ramifications of online learning. How does the network work? What is SQL? What is a portal and, if I walk through it, will it transport me to another planet? This of course is humorous, but many professors may not find themselves amused when forty students call the office at 8:00 am on Monday asking why the university server was down over the weekend. Therefore, courage is the fourth indispensable quality needed of a leader as listed by Maxwell (1999). It takes courage to navigate the technological demands of a successful online program. In fact, many administrators decidedly choose to outsource the online learning technology infrastructure because they are unable to maintain the expensive technology necessary to support distance learning (Pittinsky, 2003). Other institutions have created a specific administrative position such as ac chief information officer to manage and oversee all aspects of information technology on campus (Graves, 2000).

One must also understand the inextricable nature of the relationship between the physical technology infrastructure and the human technology infrastructure. The physical infrastructure includes the constant fear of outdated equipment, archaic building structure, and obsolete software. The human infrastructure includes knowledgeable and friendly technical support staff, media production staff, and, of course, the faculty (Bates, 2000).

Even more confusing is understanding the various course management systems typically marketed by outside commercial software vendors. Choosing between Web CT, Blackboard, Campus Pipeline, and others is a difficult and committed decision for administrators to make, especially since they ideally should seek input from faculty and students concerning the best choice of a system (American Federation of Teachers, 2001).

There is no "one size fits all" solution to technological problems. New improvements in such areas as DVD technology, wireless, speech recognition software, and virtual reality will most certainly challenge leaders to remain aware of the impact technology has on every aspect of distance learning (Farrell, 2001). The final area to explore is ownership.

Intellectual Property - You Can Seize Only What You Can See
The final issue is legal in nature and controversial – intellectual property. You can seize only what you can see (Maxwell, 1999). Unfortunately, in legal matters such as copyright and intellectual property, the related materials are often superfluous and difficult to comprehend, no less trying to apply them in a virtual academic setting. One cannot clearly understand the exact legal manner in which to operate many of the distance learning policy areas, especially since many laws concerning this issue have yet to be developed, debated and refined.

Intellectual property encompasses copyrights, patents, trademarks, and trade secrets (Smith, 2000). In 1998, the Digital Millennium Copyright Act was signed into law and specifically addressed aspects of distance education. Last November, 2002, President Bush signed into law The "Technology, Education and Copyright Harmonization (TEACH) Act," which states that copyright protected materials that a teacher would ordinarily use in the physical classroom can now, in general, be used in the digital classroom (Russel, 2002). With the new law on the books, however, Russel (2002) states, "Institutions will, over time, decide how they choose to react to TEACH exemptions and requirements."

Traditionally, colleges and universities have not sought to assert copyright over course materials and other traditional scholarly works (Gorman, 1998). Under the principle of academic freedom, faculty members generally have the right to develop and modify course materials within their fields of expertise, and to use pedagogical techniques they deem most appropriate for the subject matter.

Few court decisions have been rendered on this subject, but some of the most prominent decisions by the federal courts have followed traditional academic practice and found that faculty authors own copyright in their academic materials. At the University of Texas System, faculty members retain ownership of any web course they create. The university can claim ownership, however, when parties agree beforehand that a faculty person is hired for the sole purpose of creating an on-line course (Carnevale & Young, 1999).

Today, this topic is heated within academia with one of the main reasons for discourse being money. Creating course content and digitizing material can be lucrative to the faculty member as courses and curriculum have become "products" sought after by commercial online distance learning companies, for-profit universities, and publishers. Existing policies at colleges and universities vary greatly. Twigg (2000) presents three basic approaches for intellectual policy decisions.
1. Some institutions assert ownership over the copyrightable works of their faculty, citing the agency principles of works made for hire.

2. Some institutions allow faculty members to continue to assert ownership over their copyrightable works.
3. Some institutions attempt to allocate ownership via contract.

As a general rule, parties should enter into written agreements with curriculum writers, professors, students and all other contributors. Each agreement should specifically define the ownership of intellectual property rights in the content itself and the materials integrated into the course. Without such agreements, ownership questions could ultimately be decided through litigation.

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