DISTANCE LEARNING IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES: LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES FOR CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT

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The wave of technology sweeping community college campuses, including a concurrent and equally phenomenal growth in distance education programs, necessitates fundamental changes in many faculty roles. As faculty face these changes, how can community college leaders provide them with the support to successfully transform themselves into technology-savvy 21st century instructors? By skillfully leading, while investing in professional development programs grounded in the Kouzes and Posner leadership model, community college leaders can facilitate the successful transformation of campuses into centers of technology-based learning. Change is difficult, and all employees may not be comfortable with technology, but all have a commitment and responsibility to work to ensure access and success for all students, regardless of their social status, skills, or prior learning experience.

For over 100 years, America’s community colleges have been leaders in implementing an egalitarian mission of teaching and learning—bringing the opportunity for economic advancement to every American, regardless of means or prior schooling. Through their open-door admissions policies, convenient locations of campuses and centers, low cost, community service and continuing education programs, and “can do” response to development of new programs and curricula, America’s community colleges rightfully have earned the label of “people’s colleges.” Community colleges have transformed American higher education, replacing elitist traditions with a commitment to change, where that change makes higher education accessible to countless thousands who otherwise would be excluded from the benefits of American higher education.

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Unique among the sectors of American higher education, community colleges have emphasized the importance of the colleges’ relationships to their students through personalized counseling and advising programs, assessment programs to assist with course placement, programs such as developmental education to prepare students for college level work, an emphasis on teaching and learning, and small class size to encourage faculty and student interaction. With a community college now located within driving distance of virtually all Americans, this sector of higher education is a true model of egalitarianism—education for all!

As the technology revolution increasingly transforms every aspect of our lives, the question naturally arises as to what impact, if any, this revolution will have on the egalitarian mission of community colleges? The effect of this revolution is already apparent in the improved efficiency in the operation of community colleges. For instance, today most community colleges enjoy the benefits of computerized student records and tracking systems for faculty advising programs and have integrated data management systems to provide practical information about the effectiveness of specific programs. The Internet has all but replaced the phone as the medium of choice for internal communications.

Further, computers are no longer restricted exclusively to administrative offices. Personal computers have become so affordable that they have made their way into nearly every faculty office, while students have virtually unlimited use of Internet-accessible computers in labs and libraries. But most significantly, computers have become a mainstay for implementing learner-center classrooms and extending the classroom beyond the campus. Technology has enhanced student access by bringing courses to homes for students who may be unable to attend traditional campus-based classes because of physical disabilities, lack of transportation, or the demands of family and work.

With the infusion of technology, the roles of faculty have changed. Faculty are no longer solely in charge of traditional classroom learning as “masters of the blackboard.” They are expected to change—to become competent in the use of available learning technologies and to put these new competencies to work in the classroom.

In addition to significant increases in the campus-based use of technology, community colleges have seen a concurrent and equally phenomenal growth in distance education programs (Dillon & Cintron, 1997). According to Parrott (n.d.), as of 1994, 80% of community colleges offered some form of distance education. How do campuses define “distance education”? The term “distance education” is used to encompass virtually every form of delivering off campus instruction,
including satellite television, video conferencing, cable, audiotapes, computer systems, fax, correspondence courses, home study, and independent study. The broad usage of this term has clouded research about exactly how many community colleges are offering specific types of distance education programs. What is clear, however, is that community colleges have expanded their modes of instructional delivery, making fundamental and far-reaching changes in the role of faculty necessary.

Change is stressful and difficult. It should, therefore, come as no surprise that the technological advancements on community colleges campuses, along with the leadership forces advocating various forms of distance education, have resulted in uneasiness, approaching anxiety, among many faculty. With the infusion of technology, many feel a loss of autonomy in their classrooms. Others experience stress from the realization that many students are more knowledgeable of the technology than they are. In her plea for professors to embrace technology in courses, Lynch (2002) confessed “most of us find it uncomfortable—downright painful—to be in a situation which we don’t really understand what we’re expected to be doing.” She continues, “We needn’t be so protective of our work product, our status, and our future, so frantic to stay in charge” (p. B15).

As faculty face the necessity of change, how can community college leaders provide them with the support to successfully transform themselves into “technology-savvy” 21st century instructors? First, these leaders need to seek to understand faculty unease by listening to them. Paulson (1988) suggests that leading others in a changing world requires skills of cultivating the “listening edge” by absorbing the feelings being expressed and coming to understand the issues. Bridges’ (1991, p. 51) advice is to realize that “beginnings are strange things. People want them to happen, but fear them at the same time.” If their colleges are going to successfully adapt to the new technology and use of modalities of distance learning effectively, community college leaders must incorporate effective change leadership strategies, listen, and invest in the success of their faculty colleagues.

ADDRESSING CHALLENGES OF CHANGE: TERMS, QUESTIONS, AND PROGRAMS

Two terms important to understanding distance learning, and the changes we expect of faculty, are synchronous and asynchronous communication. Practically, what do these terms mean? The primary distinction between these two forms of learning is whether the instructor and the learner are engaged in the learning activity at
exactly the same time. For instance, asynchronous communications allow the student to learn independently of the instructor through such media as computer software, cable television broadcasts, or electronically stored information on platforms such as Embanet, Blackboard, and Web-CT. Synchronous communications use technologies that not only allow for real-time student-instructor interaction, typically in the form of computer conferencing, but also permit the co-terminous participation of a theoretically unlimited number of students, much like a traditional class. Audio and video conferencing, computer chat rooms, and interactive television systems are all examples of synchronous communications. Web-based classes can be both synchronous and asynchronous.

There is currently a debate among the most technologically knowledgeable community college faculty and administrators as to which of these two teaching modalities is superior. But from the perspective of the average instructor, this debate is largely irrelevant. Whether a college opts for asynchronous or synchronous learning technologies, both require significant pedagogical shifts for faculty accustomed to traditional classroom methodologies.

Is distance education compatible with the open-access, open-door egalitarian mission of the community college? Champions of distance education argue that more students are served by offering learning through these diverse delivery systems, but critics say that low-income, minority, and underrepresented students are most likely to be “technology poor” and lack the resources—a well-equipped computer, ISP access, cable TV access, and the like—that are required to access distance education courses. Will a greater use of technology-based distance education divide community college students into haves and have-nots, effectively undermining the principle of open access that is the hallmark of community colleges? Do students, irrespective of their race or socioeconomic background, learn as well in distance education classes as they do in traditional, campus-based classes? Will they persist as well as students enrolled in traditional classes? The answers to these questions are critical, especially in the context of a balanced debate of this technology movement. We owe it to our students, and especially to the economically disadvantaged, that community college faculty and administrators fully research and debate these questions before beginning a wholesale expansion of alternative learning systems. To do otherwise is to put at risk the learning of students who have placed their trust in us.

One common sense reality that remains steadfast and consistent throughout this discussion of distance learning is that student persistence and success is closely associated with the quality of student
interaction with professors and peers. Not surprisingly, caring faculty (whether offering traditional campus-based or distance education) who create learning systems that increase the quality and quantity of student interaction, promote student success.

Investing in systems that support faculty in enhancing their interaction with students can be a key to the success of community college distance learning programs. For instance, Tomball College, a community college in Texas, has developed a center to specifically address issues of distance education retention and, as a result, has improved student persistence and satisfaction rates significantly (Simpson & Head, 2000). In Georgia, Floyd College teamed up with Clayton College and State University to infuse computers and technology into every classroom and to focus those efforts on measurable student learning (Lord & Bishop, 2001). Every student and faculty member at Floyd College is issued a laptop computer with compatible software. A “help desk” is staffed 12 hours a day, four days a week. In addition, the college’s Instructional Technology Development Center includes full-time support staff specifically to focus on faculty development, including mentoring.

Another exception to a “sink or swim” approach of assisting faculty to cope with the unique stress of online instruction is a new multi-college consortium in Maryland. Twenty-three Maryland colleges have formed the Faculty Online Technology Training Consortium whose primary purpose is to implement training programs and to develop materials to help professors with online classes (Young, 2001). By combining their own resources, augmented by a $70,000 grant from the Maryland Higher Education Commission, this consortium is addressing professional development and training issues of online faculty on a large scale that allows for a degree of efficiency not possible with comparable single-campus programs.

Are the Maryland consortium, the Center at Tomball College, and the extensive program at Floyd College exceptions or the norm in the assistance that community colleges provide faculty and students as they transition to online learning? Do community colleges pay far too little attention to training, professional development, and on-going support for faculty who are teaching online classes? Is there a need to develop a program to certify faculty who have acquired the competencies required to effectively teach using the various distance education modalities? These are research questions that should be explored on a national level.

What are the ramifications of an increased reliance on distance education for campus faculty who are uncomfortable with teaching outside traditional community college classroom settings? What roles
LEADING TECHNOLOGICAL CHALLENGES OF CHANGE THROUGH FACULTY DEVELOPMENT

Community college leaders are expected to be competent, forward-thinking professionals with a sense of direction and ability to articulate that direction in ways that motivate others to be successful. Department chairs, division chairs, assistant deans, deans, vice presidents and presidents are expected to exhibit leadership traits and skills that will ensure faculty success, whatever the new program or initiative. What leadership models or approaches might be helpful guides to develop a college’s most precious resources—faculty and staff—in making the best possible use of the new wave of learning technologies?

The fundamental practices of leadership espoused by Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner (1995) in *The Leadership Challenge: How to Keep Getting Extraordinary Things Done in Organizations* represent a simple, yet effective, approach to effectively mobilize faculty and staff in support of the new learning technologies. Kouzes and Posner have a research base of over 60,000 leaders and constituents at all levels in both public and private organizations. Based on their studies of what leaders do, including what they do to successfully facilitate change, Kouzes and Posner recommend a basic, common sense model for leadership built on five fundamental practices and ten commitments to action.

The Kouzes and Posner model, summarized below, implies a generally positive view of the capacity and willingness of individuals to change. Based on this author’s personal experience, virtually all community college faculty are willing to change if they are involved in the process, understand expectations and rewards, and if they are led in systematic, inclusive, and positive ways. This model is a process model that avoids jargon, something that is one of the failings of most
management systems, according to Robert Birnbaum’s (2000) *Management Fads in Higher Education*.

**THE KOUZES-POSNER LEADERSHIP MODEL**

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<th>Practices of Leadership</th>
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<td>Challenging the Process</td>
<td>1) Search out challenging opportunities to change, grow, innovate, and improve.</td>
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<td>2) Experiment, take risks and learn from the accompanying mistakes.</td>
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<td>Inspiring a Shared Vision</td>
<td>3) Envision an uplifting and enabling future.</td>
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<td>4) Enlist others in a common vision by appealing to their values, interests, hopes, and dreams.</td>
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<td>Enabling Others To Act</td>
<td>5) Foster collaboration by promoting cooperative goals and building trust.</td>
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<td>6) Strengthen people by giving power away, providing choice, developing competence, assigning critical tasks, and offering visible support.</td>
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<td>Modeling the Way</td>
<td>7) Set the example by behaving in ways that are consistent with shared values.</td>
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<td>8) <em>Achieve small wins</em> that promote consistent progress and build commitment.</td>
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<td>Encouraging the Heart</td>
<td>9) Recognize individual contributions to the success of every project.</td>
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<td>10) Celebrate team accomplishments regularly.</td>
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These leadership principles may be useful in various aspects of leading community colleges through change. The following is a brief application of these principles in the arena of faculty development.

**Challenging the Process**

Most traditional faculty development programs are “one shot” activities characterized by guest speakers, day seminars, and
disconnected events typically scheduled immediately prior to the start of classes, when faculty are understandably preoccupied by paperwork and preparing course syllabi, and deans are searching for part-time faculty to meet unexpected needs. Moreover, all too frequently, external “experts” are brought to campus when little effort is made to utilize the talents of “internal experts.” The cliché that a consultant is someone who is an expert only after traveling out of state or at least 100 miles away from a home campus is true on many campuses.

By challenging existing processes and practices, community college leaders will search out opportunities to build programs to support faculty and staff specifically charged with implementing distance education programs. Leaders should experiment, risk, and challenge the status quo by searching for alternative professional development programs—go shopping for other ideas. Rather than expecting faculty to work in isolation, for many a threatening prospect, leaders should form teams to do the shopping. By encouraging “possibility thinking” among these faculty and staff teams, and personally modeling “risk taking” leadership behaviors, others will quickly adopt these new institutional norms and approach staff and faculty development in creative (and likely effective) new ways.

Inspiring a Shared Vision

Nothing truly worthwhile is accomplished without others sharing the vision. Just because a community college president and board want a college to be “high tech” does not ensure that faculty and staff will immediately embrace their vision with the same enthusiasm. The adage that “People are more likely to support what they help create” is an important principle for shaping processes of developing a shared vision. To support a vision, stakeholders must be involved in giving it life and direction. The essential—but too often ignored—first step in winning this support is that leaders listen and listen often.

To inspire a shared vision, leaders must polish their personal leadership skills. But which ones? Which specific skills are the most critical in winning broad faculty and staff support for a major change in institutional vision and function? Roueche, Baker, and Rose (1989) describe the success of community college leaders in gaining broad faculty and staff support for their personal visions, community college leaders who inspired a shared vision were believable, calculated risk takers, skilled conceptualizers, and talented communicators.
Enabling Others to Act

Leaders must foster collaboration by encouraging all aspects of the organization to work cooperatively toward common, organizationally appropriate goals. To this end, leaders must give those who assume the risks of critical tasks the necessary resources and authority to succeed. For example, when campus leaders charge a committee with organizing a professional development program to support distance education, it must be given the authority to design the program and the means to implement its design. To strengthen support and meaningful programming, leaders must be willing to “give power away,” even when the issues addressed by a faculty and staff planning group are highly sensitive. Leaders must be prepared to respond thoughtfully to questions about such policies as variable tuition charges for online courses, fundamental changes in the evaluation and reward system for distance learning faculty, and intellectual property rights. Some community colleges have developed contracts to cover faculty compensation and intellectual property rights, but unfortunately, many community colleges have simply ignored these issues.

One truism is clear: support systems, organizational structures, reward systems, and the type of professional development programs must be altered for the success of distance learning programs. Frequently, students enrolled in distance learning programs never come to campus to enjoy the benefits of student services such as counseling, career development and job placement, library services, and student activities. If, for no other reason than meeting the requirements of the accrediting agencies, new ways of delivering essential programs and services must be devised—in short, changes in services will be necessary. Indeed, the extent of these changes—how does a college make its counseling services, much less its library, available to students enrolled online—will require the collaboration of all stakeholders, not solely from academic affairs, but from student affairs, development, and business affairs units.

Modeling the Way

To effectively demonstrate support for changes associated with distance learning, community college leaders must model the way. Administrators who believe that teaching online takes less time than teaching face to face would benefit from not just studying the research in this area, but from team teaching courses with online instructors. Faculty and staff will not believe, respect, or follow leadership that does not use the technology that they profess.
Mentoring programs are excellent examples of modeling the way. In a non-threatening environment, faculty can learn from leader/mentors about what matters to them most at the time. Effective mentors model the way as coaches, guides, facilitators, and counselors. Mentors should be selected, perhaps by peers, as “internal experts.” Mentors should be valued by leadership, appropriately recognized, and adequately compensated.

Modeling the way includes leadership supporting small wins. When a faculty member learns to use a platform such as Blackboard, WebCT, or Embanet (even in a basic way), a system of recognition and support for these small wins must be in place. As Lynch (2002) notes, “although those technologies may intimidate us, we can start with a few, relatively easy small steps” (p. B15). For example, certificates of achievement are one way of recognizing small wins. By consistently supporting faculty with the achievement of small steps—small wins—commitment and morale are strengthened.

Encouraging the Heart

Change is difficult and all faculty will not be comfortable with the infusion of technology. But every employee has a commitment and responsibility to work to ensure student success. Community colleges take pride in serving students in personalized ways wherever, whenever, and in whatever ways necessary to ensure student learning and success. According to Kouzes and Posner (1995), encouraging the heart requires that leaders sincerely recognize individual contributions to the success of projects. Whatever the contribution (curriculum, delivery, counseling, funding support), systems should be in place to ensure that individual and team efforts are recognized, celebrated, and rewarded.

CHALLENGES OF CHANGE

The challenges of change (and many questions associated with issues of technology and distance education) can be addressed through the planning and implementation of a comprehensive professional development program that is grounded in well-established, basic principles of effective leadership. All faculty and staff may never be comfortable with technology, computers, or distance education. But by following sound principles of leadership all faculty should feel ownership of the vision, mission, and values of the community college as the college overcomes the challenges of change.

Community colleges have a rich history of modeling access to American higher education in creative, multi-delivery modes that
emphasize personalization and student success. Will the emergence of technology in community colleges be “The Great Equalizer” as suggested by Hancock (2001). Will community colleges of all sizes and in all locations have an equal opportunity to be successful with online classes, distance learning, and an infusion of technology? The answers to these questions are not yet apparent. But what is clear is that strong leadership is needed to invest in a community college’s most precious resources—its faculty, staff, and leadership—and a recommitment to a value system that places access and equity above all other considerations.

REFERENCES


