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Designing the perfect online program

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Designing the "Perfect" Online *Program*

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"The Perfect Online Course" was described by Orellana, Hudgins, and Simonson (2009). This book of readings clearly presented issues central to course design such as time, organization, production, evaluation, and accreditation. It is an important planning document for the distance educator.
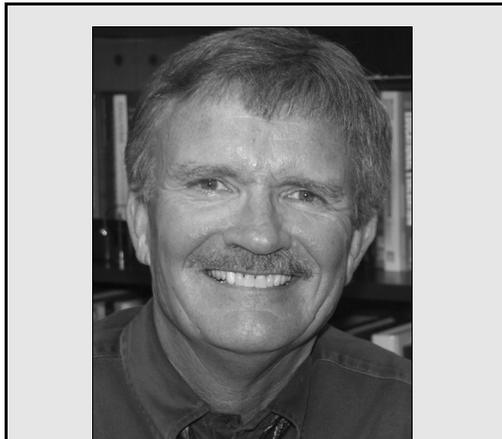
Since then, best practices for course design have become much more widely

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understood. However, Orellana, Hudgins and Simonson's book did not explain how to design the "perfect online *program*." Developing an entire program to be offered at a distance is considerably more complex than designing an online course.

Schools, universities, and organizations are moving quickly to offer classes, programs, and training at a distance. Most seem to be gradually making the transition from traditional offerings to distance education by first trying parts of classes, then individual courses, next blended courses, and finally entire distance-delivered programs.

Documenting the process of transitioning from traditional offerings to distance education has not been a priority of those involved in this process. It seems that "trial and error" is the favored approach, rather than a more reasoned process supported by applied research. There are some guides available, if not all in one location. For example in 2005, Simonson wrote about the eight steps for transforming an organization, with the primary purpose of the transformation being the move to distance delivered offerings. And, in 2012, the development of distance education policy and plans was described. What is missing is a combination of the two approaches—

the process of distance education implementation and the artifacts needed to support the move. Certainly, research is needed in this area.

At this point it has become clear that the following two components are needed when an organization plans to infuse distance education as a mission-central approach:

1. First, an academic technology/distance education plan is needed. This plan includes the following components:

   - vision statement;
   - mission statement;
   - guiding principles;
   - definitions;
   - goals;
   - policy development processes;
   - timeline;
   - policy review and faculty guidance;
   - references; and
   - resources.

2. Next, a process for diffusion and implementation of distance education is needed. This process includes these components:

   - development of a sense of urgency by the organization's leaders;
   - identification and empowerment of a powerful planning group;
   - identification of a clear, widely understood and agreed-on vision
   - identification of those willing to act on the vision;
   - development of plans to guarantee short term successes—successes that are widely publicized;
   - agreement on the process to combine successes; and
   - development and adoption of successes into models for additional implementation.

At the heart of the plan and process is the role of stakeholders, especially teachers, professors, and trainers. Certainly, leaders can and must support the transformation process, but those expected to implement changes—the teachers, professors, and trainers—are the groups who will promote or limit success.

The ingredients of a successful, distance delivered academic program include:

- committed and strong organizational leader;
- assessment and statement of need;
- technology plan with a detailed program for implementation of distance education;
- steering committee led by faculty that includes stakeholders such as students, staff, administrators, and alumni;
- detailed timeline;
- formative and summative evaluation plan;
- course design model, such as the unit-module-topic approach;
- full-time faculty person to implement the plan;
- instructional designer with media production skills;
- provision for a help desk for students and faculty;
- distance education policy manual for use by students, faculty, and most important, support staff;
- course management system and media production facilities and equipment;
- templates for syllabi and course components;
- budget.

And finally, it is important not to be overly worried about the many small decisions that must be made, for as Thoreau said, "Our life is frittered away by detail … simplify, simplify."

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