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## And Finally... Doing it Wrong—Who Says?

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# Doing it Wrong—Who Says?

**Michael Simonson**

Several years ago there was considerable discussion among leaders of schools, colleges, universities, and organizations who wanted to offer instruction at a distance. In response, *Distance Learning* published a column titled "Designing the Perfect Online Program" hoping that the set of guidelines provided would assist organizations in their planning, and to reduce the likelihood that ill-conceived plans would be implemented.

Apparently, what was feared has happened; many, even most organizations seemed to have followed intuition rather

than science and they "did it wrong." A university provost was even heard to say at a recent meeting of higher education leaders that you "cannot do it wrong; it is easy to start offering courses and programs at a distance."

Well, maybe, but perhaps a revisit to an updated set of planning guidelines for offering programs at a distance is needed.

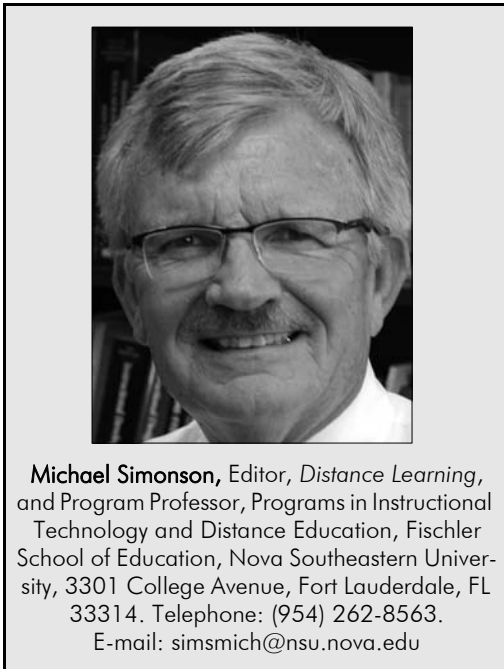
First, an academic technology/distance education plan is needed. This plan includes the following components:

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

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-upon vision;

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- 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 addition implementation.

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

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

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

- a course management system and media production facilities and equipment;
- templates for syllabi and course components; and
- a budget.

Some examples of approaches for developing distance delivered programs that have not been successful include:

- Buying a program from a vendor with little or no stakeholder involvement.
- Placing a distance delivered program's management in a support group that is not part of the mainstream of the organization.
- Developing the distance delivered program by creating a different set of policies than those of regular organizational policies. Or, not appropriately modifying existing policies to meet the needs of the distance delivered program and its students, such as not modifying the services of the institution that are needed outside of regular business hours.
- Attempting to develop online programs as profit centers, rather than ones that are valued similarly to traditional programs.
- Staffing the online programs with part-timers; an institution's commitment to any program can easily be determined by examining the staff and the budget.

*And finally*, the creation of new programs and different ways of providing learning opportunities is exciting and important business. As Daniel Burnham is attributed to have said, "Make no little plans, they have no magic to stir the blood."

## **REFERENCE**

Simonson, M. (2012). Designing the "perfect" online program. *Distance Learning*, 9(2), 76–74.