

Reflective Analysis of the Transition of a Face-to-Face Principal Preparation Program into an Online Format

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Abstract

This paper addresses the redesign of a face-to-face principal preparation program into an online program. An action research project began in 2004, gathering data to guide the transition. A key element was the commitment of program faculty to reflect throughout the process by considering their personal technological strengths, weaknesses, and needs, altering as needed. Data collection included investigating competing programs, feedback from principal interviews, focus groups, instructor evaluations, enrollment and retention data, and current curriculum. The results of the study, including growth in student enrollment, data from program exit exams, and student perceptions of the program are provided.

Objectives

This study investigates the redesign of a traditional, face-to-face principal program into a fully online program. The study examines current educational leadership and online learning literature, explains the methods used in the transition, and outlines the steps taken to advance faculty's skills in teaching and technology in an online program. Objectives of the study:

1. Improving faculty and students' technology skills
2. Assessing quality in online instruction
3. Building positive relationships and personalizing instruction with students in an online environment.

Perspectives

Perspectives examined in the redesign of the principal program were 1) the role of technology in learning; 2) comparing face-to-face programs with distance education programs; and 3) personalizing instruction in an online environment. The redesign of this program encompassed much more than technology, but it was a key component in preparing successful candidates and providing them with the skills to influence student achievement. Faculty considered the research findings of Kulik, Wasman, Connell, & Gray that identified technology, when used appropriately, as improving education in the effect-size range of between 0.30 and 0.40 (Valdez, 2004). Faculty focused on second order change as noted by Waters, Marzano, and McNutty in a 2003 McREL paper on balanced leadership that stated:

Change becomes second order when it is not obvious how it will make things better for people with similar interests. It requires individuals or groups of stakeholders to learn new approaches, or it conflicts with prevailing values and norms. Second order change creates a break with the past and requires people to think outside of existing paradigms. (p. 7)

As faculty debated whether to deliver online instruction in the same manner as the previous face-to-face classes, they considered the research of Picard & Bates (2005) in examining whether distance education should mirror as closely as possible face-to-face classroom teaching, or whether online education should be based on an educational model fundamentally different from traditional on-campus instruction methodologies. A meta analysis of research studies on the topic of face-to-face vs. online education from 1996 to 2008 by the U.S. Department of Education (2009) supplied evidence for faculty that the transition the principal preparation program into a fully online environment was supported by research. The study concluded that 1) online education is more effective than face-to-face learning; 2) Online learning combined with some face-to-face learning (blended learning) is the most effective; and 3) face-to-face learning alone is the least effective method among the three types studied.

The faculty considered numerous perspectives on the importance of building personal relationships with students. According to Grasha (2002), personalizing instruction is about building trustworthy and authentic relationships between graduate students and faculty with the intent to help students attain discipline-related knowledge and skills. The faculty member's responsibilities include serving as a guide, coach, consultant, and resource person. Mandemach, Gonzales, & Garrett (2006) and Picciano (2002) suggest that instructors in face-

to-face classes have the ability to utilize their physical presence to show their active involvement in the classroom. However, faculty who teach online must actively participate in the course, risk the perception of being invisible, or absent from the class.

Methods

The primary method/mode of inquiry for the study was and continues to be an action research project using a mixed method design. A key element during the transition of the program was the commitment of faculty to actively participate in a reflective analysis of their own technology needs and actions throughout the study and their willingness to alter those actions when necessary (Kaufman, 2009).

At the beginning of the study in 2004, faculty gathered data by conducting focus groups with current students and surveyed past students about the content of the principal program. Both groups provided suggested changes that would make the program more relevant to their needs as future leaders. Enrollment trends were examined and continue to be monitored as the faculty expands the use of technology for program delivery. Candidates' performances on exit exams before and after the transition to the online environment were also analyzed to assist faculty in making necessary program and course adjustments as warranted.

Data Sources

Data sources included investigating competing programs, reviewing the feedback from the practicing principal interviews, reviewing the feedback from the student focus groups, analyzing candidate performance, analyzing enrollment and retention data, examining candidates' scores on exit exams, examining anecdotal statements from student emails, and evaluating the current curriculum. Student evaluations of instructors/courses were analyzed as well as the documentation from faculty reflection and dialogue.

Results

The transition to 100% delivery of courses in an online format ultimately resulted in an increase of student admissions to the program. Using 2005 as a base year, the number of new students admitted to the principal program was 38; however, during the next two years the admissions numbers dropped. In 2006, 26 new students were admitted resulting in a decrease of 12 students, a 31.57% reduction from the year 2005. In 2007, 21 new students were admitted resulting in a decrease of 5 students, a 19.23% reduction from the year 2006. After realigning the program curriculum to meet the needs of students and moving 100% of the

courses to an online environment, the enrollment numbers increased. In 2008, 34 new students were admitted resulting in an increase of 13 students, a 61.90% increase from the year 2007. In 2009, 42 new students were admitted resulting in an increase of 8 students, a 23.52% increase from the year 2008. Table 1 outlines the program admissions from 2005-2009.

Table 1 Candidate Enrollment

Calendar Year	# of Students Admitted	Decrease (-) or Increase (+) Students Admitted	Decrease (-) or Increase (+) Percentage of Students Admitted
Base Year 2005	38	NA	NA
2006	26	-12	-31.57%
2007	21	-05	-19.23%
2008	34	+13	+61.90%
2009	42	+08	+23.52%

Faculty analyzed data on candidates' performance on two exit exams: 1) the Educational Testing Service (ETS) Praxis II Educational Leadership Content test, and 2) the ETS School Leaders Licensure Assessment. The years 2005 and 2006 reflect scores when the program was in the "traditional delivery" format. The years 2007 through 2009 show scores after the program moved to a fully online format. Faculty found no significant difference in the scores. Table 2 reflects candidates' scores on these exams.

Table 2 Candidate Program Exit Exam Scores

Calendar Year	Educational Testing Service (ETS) Praxis II Educational Leadership: Administration and Supervision 0410 Scores	Educational Testing Service (ETS) School Leaders Licensure Assessment (SLLA) Scores
Base Year 2005	NA*	(N=03) 186.33
2006	(N=07) 714.30	(N=08) 175.63
2007	(N=12) 690.80	(N=22) 173.27
2008	(N=16) 718.80	(N=10) 180.60
2009	(N=24) 725.40	(N=15) 175.30

* The ETS Praxis II Educational Leadership: Administration and Supervision scores were not a part of the exit criteria in 2005.

As faculty improved their technology skills to meet student needs in the online environment, they were actively involved in learning a variety of online tools and formats such as Blackboard, GoToMeeting, and desktop-to-desktop video-conferencing such as Marratech, Elluminate, and FlashMeeting. Social websites such as Classroom 2.0 and Wiki's were investigated as well. However, soon after making the transition to online instruction, faculty realized that by eliminating traditional classroom interactions, the socialization and personal exchanges that were and are such a vital component of teaching, had been minimized. As a result, instructor/student relationships were now being held together asynchronously by emails, telephone calls, instant messaging, and the occasional workshop. Faculty realized that building relationships with students is a key to successful teaching, whether it is in a face to face, or an online world. Research on video conferencing resulted in faculty integrating this type of communication into courses beginning in the fall of 2007. According to Pitler, Hubbell, Kuhn, & Malenoski:

Video-conferencing allows two-way or multi-point communication in more personable, meaningful, and relevant ways than email or telephone can provide. Through video-conferencing, students can communicate with peers and have contact with professionals who can serve as authentic audiences for student work. (2007, p. 67)

New technologies currently being included in the program to enhance the personal interactions between faculty and students include Skype and ooVoo, web-based programs that allow for one-on-one and/or small group video conferencing. Data from student responses from online surveys conducted in the summer 2009 through spring 2010 regarding the use of these programs and the impact on the learning environment will be included in the final paper.

Significance of study

For this institution, the move toward programs that are fully online is in keeping with research that shows the growth of online programs. "For the past several years, online enrollments have been growing substantially faster than overall higher education enrollments" (Allen & Seaman, 2008, p. 1). The study of the redesign of a principal preparation program contributes to the educational community by assisting others who are contemplating online instruction or changing a traditional program to online instruction with the importance of reflecting on practice. Having the willingness to not only learn new technologies as they evolve, but when and how to implement them as a part of regular practice. New communication technologies, such as video-conferencing, can bridge the differences between traditional and distant teaching. The main pedagogical issue is to understand whether new technologies will have a real impact on learning efficacy. Spitzer (2001) pointed out that "high touch" is often de-emphasized in favor of the "high tech" in online learning, and argues that "until those enamored of the hardware and software acknowledge the importance of human intervention, the full promise [of web-based distance learning] will not be realized" (p. 55). Helping students learn technology skills must go hand in hand with teaching content, and if done deliberately and with patience, helps build quality relationships between faculty and students.

Conclusion

The transition of this principal program to a fully online program has been a valuable learning experience for faculty and students. The "evolution" of the program has been from traditional on-campus face-to-face instruction, to Interactive Television, to Blackboard, social networks such as Classroom 2.0, to

video-conferencing programs such as Marratech, Elluminate, FlashMeeting, and currently to Skype and ooVoo which provide instant one on one or small group chat and/or video communication. Data collection on student satisfaction is ongoing and faculty are growing in their abilities to take risks with new technologies that enhance teaching and learning and the necessity to make the learning environment as transparent as possible in order to maintain quality relationships with students.

Since the fall of 2007, faculty has received numerous unsolicited emails from students and comments on instructor evaluations desiring to share their sentiments about the effectiveness of online instruction enhanced by video conferencing.

As this principal program continues to evolve and change, faculty will continue to collect and analyze multiple forms of data in order to deliver quality courses that are not only relevant to students' needs, but embrace technologies that help close the communication boundaries between faculty and students. "There is no denying the impact of technology on higher education. The role and availability of web-based and web-enhanced classes continues to expand" (Moore, 2005, p. 13).

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