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**The Treatise Committee for Dennis Ryan Carstens certifies that this is the approved  
version of the following treatise:**

**The Perfect Storm: Administrative Conditions of an Effective Online  
Distance Learning Program in the Lone Star College System**

**Committee:**

---

John E. Roueche, Supervisor

---

Norvell Northcutt

---

Lisa Cary

---

Linda Stegall

---

Judy Murray

**The Perfect Storm: Administrative Conditions of an Effective Online  
Distance Learning Program in the Lone Star College System**

**by**

**Dennis Ryan Carstens, B.A., M.S.**

**Treatise**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
The University of Texas at Austin  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

**Doctor of Education**

**The University of Texas at Austin  
December 2008**

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this work to my grandfather, Frederick Davenport Carstens, Sr., who set the example for me through his tenacity in supporting his widowed mother and siblings after only seven years of formal schooling, who later worked his way through college in his own pursuit of higher learning, who established his expertise professionally with the discovery of a fossil named after him, *cibicides carstensi*, and who served on doctoral committees with only a bachelors degree. My path has been much easier because of his example and hard work.

Next, to my grandmother, Eveline Carstens, who has been a shining example of joy, gratitude, spirit, compassion, and hard work. She grounded my life and living in the principles that give all other pursuits depth and meaning. If I am half the example she is to others, I will count myself fortunate.

Next, to my parents, Fred and Merleen Carstens, who also set an example for me in their academic and professional pursuits, their hard work and ethics, balancing family and professional goals, providing support to their children, and enabling me to pursue my own education.

To my children, for whom I hope this effort and work provides a witness that they too can achieve their personal potential and pursue their goals.

Finally, to my sweet wife, Fay, whose loving support and willing sacrifice with no complaint nor hesitation made this work possible throughout the adventure.

## **Acknowledgements**

I humbly acknowledge the support and examples of my treatise committee, Drs. John E. Roueche, Norvell Northcutt, Lisa Cary, Linda Stegall, and Judy Murray. Each contributed to my learning and growth in different and important ways.

To the excellent faculty at the University of Texas at Austin, you opened my understanding and invited me to see so much more. I am changed because of you.

To Dr. Ray Hawkins, President of Lone Star College – Tomball, your support for my studies was the catalyst that enabled this journey to begin.

To my staff at Lone Star College–Tomball, your encouragement, support and flexibility made it possible for me to juggle work and studies. Thank you for your willingness to use chat, email, and cell phones!

To several members of Team 62, who on occasion opened their homes to me for refuge, I will always be grateful for your kindness.

To the University of Texas CCLP staff, your patient guidance through the logistics helped transform the abstract to reality.

To the members of Team 62, I could not and would not have ever attempted this without you. I am better with you than without you. What a difference it makes to know that we will never be alone in our race to the chase.

# **The Perfect Storm: Administrative Conditions of an Effective Online Distance Learning Program in the Lone Star College System**

Publication No. \_\_\_\_\_

Dennis Ryan Carstens, Ed.D.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2008

Supervisor: John E. Roueche

This study focuses on solutions for the specific issues experienced by the distance learning program at the Lone Star College System (LSCS), a multi-college community college district located north of the Houston metro area. Utilizing practical action research methodology, the purpose of this study is to explore options for improving the LSCS distance learning program to better meet the needs of current and future distance learning students. This study combines a review of literature, local insights concerning the LSCS distance learning program, and discussions with other community college distance learning practitioners around the country for the purpose of developing an administrative proposal for the LSCS distance learning program. The study involves an exploration of the administrative and governance structure, a review of services provided to distance learning faculty and students, and an examination of quality standards for online courses and services.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

The Lone Star College System (LSCS) is a multi-college community college district in the northern and western sections of the Houston metropolitan area. The college system is the third largest college district in Texas and the largest district in the Houston metro area (Lone Star College System, 2008). The college service area comprises 1400 square miles and serves a population of 1.9 million people. There are eleven school districts in the service area with 39 high schools. Student enrollment in the college system reached nearly 50,000 in the Fall 2007 semester and has grown approximately 5000 students every 24 months.

The LSCS distance learning program, known as the eCampus, began operations in Fall 2000. The eCampus currently offers the Associate of Arts, Associate of Science, Management Associate of Applied Science, Legal Office Associate of Applied Science, Medical Office Associate of Applied Science, the Texas Core Curriculum, and twenty certificates completely on-line.

Since the inception of the eCampus in 2000, enrollments in distance learning (DL) courses have grown dramatically in response to student demand. Enrollment growth in distance learning courses has outpaced the college district's average enrollment growth, averaging 16% over the last five years. Even higher growth rates have been observed in hybrid courses over the last several semesters. In the Fall 2007 semester, 24% of all LSCS students were enrolled in at least one distance learning (DL) course. The Spring 2008 semester distance learning enrollments exceeded 14,000, while enrollments in hybrid courses exceeded 4,000. The enrollment growth at the eCampus has occurred without the addition of resources and staffing to support the expanding distance learning student population. Staff and faculty are now struggling to keep up with

the pace of the growing demand. This situation has precipitated a review of current practices to explore opportunities for expanding the LSCS response to growing student demand for distance learning options, with an emphasis on system-wide standards for consistent academic quality and a learner support system that enhances student success.

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This study focuses on solutions for the specific issues experienced by the distance learning program at the Lone Star College System (LSCS), a multi-college community college district located north of the Houston metro area. LSCS online programs and courses generally experience lower student success and retention than similar on-campus courses. LSCS staff and faculty at college campuses struggle to understand and address the needs of distance learning students, which has resulted in nonexistent or inefficient online services for distance learning students. Additionally, distance learning courses offered by the five colleges in the LSCS are inconsistent in quality and content.

The above challenges suggest that LSCS leaders explore how to organize an effective online community college distance learning program and associated services that contribute to student success in an efficient and consistent manner. This involves an exploration of the administrative and governance structure, a review of services provided to distance learning faculty and students, and an examination of quality standards for online courses and services.

The Lone Star College System is challenged to leverage creativity and ingenuity to develop a distance learning organization that addresses issues of quality and consistency in an efficient manner, while also designing a rich and rigorous learning environment. The college system is equally challenged to provide the full scope of student services in an accessible and quality manner to distance learning students.

## Definitions

*Collective intelligence.* Collective intelligence emerges from the collaboration and competition of large groups of people (Wikipedia, 2008a).

*Distance learning.* Distance learning is a system and a process that connects learners with distributed learning resources. While distance learning takes a wide variety of forms, all distance learning is characterized by:

- Separation of place and/or time between instructor and learner, among learners, and/or between learners and learning resources.
- Interaction between the learner and the instructor, among learners, and/or between learners and learning resources conducted through one or more media; use of electronic media is not necessarily required. (American Council on Education, 1996, p. 10)

*Enquiry and inquiry.* There are several citations in this study to both spelling formats for this concept. The two words are used synonymously but sometimes spelled differently in the literature.

### *IT. Information Technology*

*Participatory Culture.* A participatory culture is a culture with few barriers to personal and artistic expression and civic engagement. There is strong support for creating and sharing personal creativity. Informal mentorships usually exist to help novices learn from those with more experience. Members of the culture feel their contributions matter. They feel some degree of connection to one another. (Jenkins, H., Clinton, K., Purushotma, R., Robison, A.J., & Weigel, M., 2006)

*Personal Broadcasting.* Personal broadcasting involves posting online personal audio and video material such as podcasts, video blogs, or videos on YouTube or other video content sharing sites.

*Social Computing.* Social computing involves the application of computer technology and software to create or mimic social conventions and social contexts that facilitate interaction and collaboration. Blogs, wikis, and social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace are examples of social computing (Wikipedia, 2008d).

## **RESEARCH QUESTION**

What administrative conditions and services should be established in a multi-campus community college district online distance-learning program to improve the college district's ability to meet current and future distance learning student needs?

## **LIMITATIONS**

This study does not explore the pedagogical considerations of online instructional delivery and methods, but rather the administrative and support services that enable, influence, and support the faculty and students within an online environment managed by a multi-college district.

This study focuses on the specific issues and solutions for the Lone Star College System, which are not necessarily similar or applicable for all other community colleges in the country, but which likely can provide insights for other community colleges that are wrestling with developing or improving their distance learning programs.

## **OVERVIEW OF METHODOLOGY**

Because the purpose of this study is to explore options for improving the LSCS distance learning program, this study utilizes practical action research methodology. Action research is intended to result in improved practice (Corey, S.M., 1953). Action

research is an investigation conducted by practitioners for the purpose of improving future actions (Sagor, R., 2005). This study combines a review of literature, local insights concerning the LSCS distance learning program, and discussions with other community college distance learning practitioners around the country for the purpose of developing an administrative proposal for the LSCS distance learning program.

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

With growing demands for distance learning in an increasingly competitive marketplace, it is important to establish a distance learning program and services that meet the needs of current and future students (Howell, S.L. & Lindsay, N.K., 2003). This requires an exploration of how to organize an effective online community college distance learning program and associated services that contribute to student success in an efficient and consistent manner, while continually responding to technological advancements that affect the online environment, learning paradigms, and student expectations. The administrative conditions and services for a sustainable distance learning program need to address the trends and challenges associated with the changing marketplace and anticipate the technology-driven evolution of paradigms for teaching, learning and credentialing the online learning environment.

### **Trends Affecting Distance Learning**

In a report from the American Council on Education, Oblinger et al. (2001) describe the issues facing colleges as they move toward delivering distance learning. These include: a) changes in the way students learn, b) alignment with institutional goals and resource allocations, c) identifying the intended audience, d) considering market size and growth of distance learning, e) determining distance learning governance and

organization, f) establishing partnerships, g) ensuring quality, h) policy adjustments, i) barriers to adoption, and j) leadership challenges.

In the annual national surveys for 2007 and 2008 conducted by the Instructional Technology Council (ITC), Lokken et al. (2007; 2008) report the following trends in distance learning.

- Distance learning may represent the only real growth in enrollments for most institutions.
- Distance learning, with its technology base, is increasingly attractive to millennial students who are technology savvy.
- Distance learning continues to be the change agent for college campuses in updating and improving levels of related services for students and faculty.
- In terms of organizational placement, there is an accelerated movement of distance learning programs away from IT operations and to the academic side of the institution.
- The quality of distance learning instruction is trending towards continuous improvement as more institutional resources are redirected to distance learning. Programs are focusing on quality, consistency, assessment and retention to address concerns. (adapted from Lokken, F. & Womer, L., 2007; Lokken, F., Womer, L., & Mullins, C., 2008)

Growth in distance learning enrollments is an ongoing trend across the nation. In the Sloan Consortium's annual survey, Allen and Seaman (2007) declare that online distance learning enrollments have been growing at a higher rate than on-campus enrollments (9.7% versus 1.5%). Nationwide, nearly 3.5 million students, approximately 20% of all higher education students, enrolled in at least one distance learning course in the Fall 2006 semester.

The marketplace is changing. Hanna (1998) states that rapidly developing technologies are creating a new marketplace and new prospects for organizing and



delivering learning opportunities. He lists several broad trends that colleges should plan to address.

- The barriers to accessing learning opportunities are falling dramatically because of improved learning technologies.
- The number of providers of and approaches to education and training will continue to grow dramatically as access improves and as demand for lifelong learning increases globally.
- Universities of all types will increasingly focus on responsiveness to learner needs and desires such as convenience, timing, engagement, application of knowledge to the workplace, and learning by doing.
- Instead of simply measuring traditional inputs to the instructional process, universities will be forced by the increasingly competitive and global marketplace for learning to develop new measures of institutional and program quality and responsiveness.
- The potential reach for all educational institutions in a digital economy is global. (Hanna, D.E., 1998, p. 91)

In a comprehensive review of books, reports, journal articles and websites, Howell and Lindsay (2003) compiled over 140 pages of citations regarding trends affecting distance learning. From analysis of the data, the authors identified 32 themes in the trends that require consideration when planning a distance learning program.

### ***Student Enrollment Trends***

1. The current higher education infrastructure cannot accommodate the growing college-aged population and enrollments, making more distance education programs necessary.
2. Students are shopping for courses that meet their schedules and circumstances.
3. Higher-education learner profiles, including online, information-age, and adult learners, are changing.

4. The percentage of adult, female, and minority learners is increasing.
5. Retention rates for distance learning concern administrators and faculty members.

### ***Faculty Trends***

6. Traditional faculty roles are shifting or unbundling into instructional designers, technologists, and instructors/facilitators
7. The need for faculty development, support, and training is growing.
8. Faculty tenure is being challenged, allowing for more non-traditional faculty roles in distance education.
9. Some faculty members are resisting technological course delivery.
10. Faculty members who participate in distance education courses develop better attitudes toward distance education and technology.
11. Instructors of distance courses can feel isolated.
12. Faculty members demand reduced workload and increased compensation for distance courses.

### ***Academic Trends***

13. Knowledge and information are growing exponentially.
14. The institutional landscape of higher education is changing: traditional campuses are declining, for-profit institutions are growing, and public and private institutions are merging.
15. There is a shift in organizational structure toward decentralization of continuing education programs, which can affect distance learning if it is placed within continuing education.
16. Instruction is becoming more learner-centered, non-linear, and self-directed, following constructivist, sociocultural and metacognitive models.

17. There is a growing emphasis on academic accountability, based more on educational outcomes.
18. Academic emphasis is shifting from course-completion to competency, from degree to certification, from the theoretical to performance and skills.
19. Education is becoming more seamless between high school, college, and further studies.
20. Higher education outsourcing and partnerships are increasing.
21. Some advocate standardizing content in reusable learning objects that allow for individually customizable learning while also standardizing content.

### ***Technology Trends***

22. Technological devices are becoming more versatile and ubiquitous, pushing toward mobile learning environments using smaller handheld technologies.
23. There is a huge growth in Internet usage.
24. Technological fluency is becoming a graduation requirement, including enrollment in at least one distance learning course, in order to function in an increasingly technological and networked world.

### ***Economic Trends***

25. When the economy is in recession, there are fewer resources for higher education and higher education initiatives such as distance education.
26. Funding challenges are the top IT concerns for many colleges.
27. Lifelong learning is becoming a competitive necessity, requiring cycles of retraining and retooling, resulting in increasing demands for short accelerated programs.

### ***Distance Learning Trends***

28. With growing demand for distance learning, more courses, degrees, and universities are becoming available through distance learning programs.
29. The Internet is becoming dominant among other distance-education media, displacing interactive video, instructional television, and paper-based correspondence courses.
30. The distinction between distance and local education is disappearing as web enhanced and blended courses become the established norm for on-campus instruction.
31. The need for effective course-management systems and Web services is growing.
32. There is an increasing need for learning and teaching strategies that exploit the capabilities of emerging technologies such as iPhones, iPods, PDAs, streaming media, virtual reality, and gaming environments. (adapted from Howell, S.L. & Lindsay, N.K., 2003)

The New Media Consortium publishes an annual study, *The Horizon Report*, to identify emerging trends that will likely have an impact in higher education. Below is a synopsis of the trend forecasts from the 2006, 2007, and 2008 reports.

- Dynamic knowledge creation and social computing tools and processes are becoming more widespread and accepted.
- Mobile and personal technology such as cell phones and iPods is increasingly being viewed as a delivery platform for services of all kinds.
- Consumers are increasingly expecting individualized online services, tools, and experiences, and open access to media, knowledge, information, and learning.
- Collaboration is increasingly seen as critical across the range of educational activities, including intra- and inter-institutional activities of any size or scope. Knowledge creation is becoming a collaborative activity.

- The notions of collective intelligence and mass amateurization are pushing the boundaries of scholarship and encouraging debate on what constitutes scholarly work.
- The way we work, collaborate, and communicate is evolving as boundaries become more fluid and globalization increases.
- Access to—and portability of—content is increasing as smaller, more powerful devices such as smart phones, Apple’s iPhone, Amazon’s Kindle, and LG’s Voyager are introduced. (adapted from New Media Consortium & Educause, 2006, 2007, 2008)

### Challenges for Distance Learning

Berge (1998) describes the challenges facing distance learning programs as “situational, epistemological, philosophical, psychological, pedagogical, technical, social, and/or cultural” (§ 5).

In the 2007 report of its annual national survey, the Instruction Technology Council (Lokken, F. & Womer, L., 2007) indicates that growing distance learning enrollments and accrediting agency expectations are challenging colleges to develop and provide equivalent online student services for distance learning students. The status of those efforts is listed below in Table 1.1, showing numerous areas needing improvement.

Table 1.1

#### *ITC Status Report on Distance Learning Student Services and Technology Support*

Service/Technology	% Offered
Online tutoring assistance	42%
Online counseling/advising services	43%
Online plagiarism evaluation	48%

Online student organization, web site & services	49%
Campus web portal	52%
Audio/Video Streaming	55%
Online student orientation for distance learning classes	66%
Online textbook sales	66%
Campus testing center for distance learning students	69%
Dedicated web site for distance learning program & students	76%
Online admission to institution	77%
Online payment of tuition & fees	78%
Online student course evaluation	79%
Online information/application for financial aid	82%
Online registration for classes	87%
Help Desk and technical support for distance learning students	88%
Help Desk and technical support for distance learning faculty	90%
Distance learning-specific faculty training	92%
Online library services & resources	96%

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Source: (Lokken, F. & Womer, L., 2007)

In the subsequent 2008 report, the Instructional Technology Council (Lokken, F., Womer, L., & Mullins, C., 2008) lists the top challenges for distance learning administrators (Table 1.2), faculty teaching distance learning courses (Table 1.3), and challenges faced by DL administrators regarding distance learning students (Table 1.4).

Table 1.2

*ITC Greatest Challenges for Administrators of Distance Learning Programs*

Challenge	Rank			
	2007	2006	2005	2004
Support staff needed for training and technical assistance	1	1	1	1
Adequate student services for distance education students	2	3	5	2
Operating and equipment budgets	3	2	2	3
Faculty acceptance	4	5	3	4
Adequate administrative authority	5	4	4	5
Adequate space for training and technical assistance	6	6	7	7
Organizational acceptance	7	7	6	6
Student acceptance	8	8	8	8

Source: (Lokken, F., Womer, L., & Mullins, C., 2008)

Table 1.3

*ITC Greatest Challenges for Faculty Teaching Distance Learning Courses*

Challenge	Rank			
	2007	2006	2005	2004
Workload issues	1	1	1	1
Training	2	2	3	4
Compensation	3	3	5	2

Buy-in to electronically-delivered instruction	4	4	4	3
Technical support	5	5	6	5
Recruitment	6	6	2	6
Intellectual property/ownership issues	7	7	7	7

Source: (Lokken, F., Womer, L., & Mullins, C., 2008)

Table 1.4

*ITC Greatest Challenges for DL Administrators Regarding Distance Learning Students*

Challenge	Rank			
	2007	2006	2005	2004
Completion of student evaluations	1	6	5	5
Orientation/preparation for taking distance education classes	2	1	1	1
Assessing student learning and performance in distance education classes	3	2	2	2
Computer problems and providing technical support	4	3	6	3
Providing equivalent student services virtually	5	4	3	4
Low student completion rate	6	5	4	6
Cheating	7	7	-	7
Recruitment/interest in distance education by students	8	8	8	8

Source: (Lokken, F., Womer, L., & Mullins, C., 2008)



## **Emerging Learning Paradigms**

The technological landscape is changing the way people think and learn. Barone (2005) forecasts a learning environment influenced by a new cultural learning context with new rules, relationships, and behaviors. The socio-technological context is characterized by multi-dimensionality, continuous change, flexible structures, collaboration, and dynamic reconfiguration.

Alfred (2007) sees a trend toward the development of learning communities connected via technology and utilizing content that has become a commodity. Brown and Long (2006) state that community college leaders need to develop active, social, informal learning spaces. Windham (2005) describes the Net Gen student as very technologically savvy, but craving actual conversation and interaction with others. Moore, Moore, and Fowler (2005) suggest teaching methodologies that include social networking, games, and simulations.

Today's students approach technology differently and are not intimidated by it. This changes the way they learn and it impacts the distance learning program's approach to distance learning course design, teaching methodology, and online learning environments. Frand (2000, as cited in Oblinger, D.G., Barone, C.A., & Hawkins, B.L., 2001) describes the mindset of the information age this way:

- Computers aren't technology.
- The Internet is better than TV.
- Reality is no longer real.
- Doing is more important than knowing.
- Nintendo (trial-and-error; experimentation) is preferable to logic.
- Multitasking is a way of life.

- Typing is preferable to handwriting.
- Staying connected is essential.
- There is zero tolerance for delays.
- The lines between consumer and creator are blurring. (p. 5)

Lenhart et al. (2007) report that 93% of teens ages 12-17 use the internet, with ever increasing numbers of teens using the internet for social interaction activities via blogs or social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace. Teens are creating a “participatory culture” (p. 3) of creating, mixing, sharing, and reusing information. A majority (64%) of teens now engage in creating content online with at least one of the technologies listed below, many among them (68%) using more than one of the technologies.

- 39% of online teens share their own artistic creations online, such as artwork, photos, stories, or videos, up from 33% in 2004.
- 33% create or work on web pages or blogs for others, including those for groups they belong to, friends, or school assignments – essentially the same number as reported this in 2004 (32%).
- 28% have created their own online journal or blog, up from 19% in 2004.
- 27% maintain their own personal webpage, up from 22% in 2004.
- 26% remix content they find online into their own creations, up from 19% in 2004. (Lenhart, A., Madden, M., Macgill, A.R., & Smith, A., 2007, p. 3)

Oblinger et al. (2001) describes younger learners as much less intimidated by technology. Whereas older generation students hesitate to try to use technology unless they feel they understand it, younger learners jump in, see what works, experiment, and learn by doing. This reflects a learning style that distance learning programs and courses

need to accommodate. Oblinger et al. (2001) list implications for the web and today's learners upon learning environments.

- *Exploration*: E-learners use the web as an exploratory tool to access a plethora of information and resources.
- *Experience*: The web offers e-learners a comprehensive learning experience, from synchronous learning to threaded discussions to self-paced study.
- *Engagement*: The web captivates learners by enabling creative approaches to learning that foster collaboration and a sense of community.
- *Ease of use*: The web is easy to use not only for learners, but for learning providers as well. Content can be made immediately available to learners across all technical platforms (e.g., Windows and Unix).
- *Empowerment*: The web puts learners in the driver's seat with a set of tools that enables personalization of content and allows learners to choose the way in which they best learn.
- *Effectiveness*: There is a growing body of evidence that, owing to the ability to create customized learning environments on the web, distributed education is more effective than the classroom lecture and the traditional relationship between student and faculty member. (Oblinger, D.G., Barone, C.A., & Hawkins, B.L., 2001, p. 6)

Dede (2007) contends that our technology tools shape our communicating, learning, and thinking processes.

Our ways of thinking and knowing, teaching and learning are undergoing a sea change, and what is emerging seems both rich and strange. The rising tide of sophisticated information and communications technologies driving this shift will not recede, so we should try to understand the richness, to welcome the strangeness as a source of creative insight, and to fuse some synthesis combining the best of old and new. (Dede, C., 2007, p. 25)

Dede (2007) explains that today's students are acquiring new learning styles and preferences as they interact with immersive and/or collaborative technologies. The new learning styles include:

- fluency in multiple media, valuing each for the types of communication, activities, experiences, and expressions it empowers;
- learning based on collectively seeking, sieving, and synthesizing experiences, rather than individually locating and absorbing information from some single best source;
- active learning based on experience (real and simulated) that includes frequent opportunities for reflection;
- expression through nonlinear, associational webs of representations rather than linear "stories" (for example, authoring a simulation and a Web page rather than a paper to express understanding); and
- codesign of learning experiences personalized to individual needs and preferences. (Dede, C., 2007, pp. 22-23)

Jenkins et al. (2006) articulate the following new literacies that are appearing as a result of learners interacting with new forms of media. The literacies enable participation in the communities created by the new networked technologies.

- *play*, the capacity to experiment with one's surroundings as a form of problem solving;
- *performance*, the ability to adopt alternative identities for the purpose of improvisation and discovery;
- *simulation*, the ability to interpret and construct dynamic models of real-world processes;
- *appropriation*, the ability to meaningfully sample and remix media content;
- *multitasking*, the ability to scan one's environment and shift focus as needed to salient details;

- *distributed cognition*, the ability to interact meaningfully with tools that expand mental capacities;
- *collective intelligence*, the ability to pool knowledge and compare notes with others toward a common goal;
- *judgment*, the ability to evaluate the reliability and credibility of different information sources;
- *transmedia navigation*, the ability to follow the flow of stories and information across multiple modalities;
- *networking*, the ability to search for, synthesize, and disseminate information; and
- *negotiation*, the ability to travel across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives, and grasping and following alternative norms. (Jenkins, H., Clinton, K., Purushotma, R., Robison, A.J., & Weigel, M., 2006, p. 4)

It is likely that the most refined teaching and learning processes and styles of which the human mind is capable may only be attained in an environment that is yet to be built. Distance learning and the emerging virtual spaces and experiences will probably enable new constructs that launch new forms of “knowing.” The concept of collective intelligence is an example that comes to mind.

Collective Intelligence. The kind of knowledge and understanding that emerges from large groups of people is collective intelligence. In the coming years, we will see educational applications for both explicit collective intelligence—evidenced in projects like the Wikipedia and in community tagging—and implicit collective intelligence, or data gathered from the repeated activities of numbers of people, including search patterns, cell phone locations over time, geocoded digital photographs, and other data that are passively obtained. Data mashups will tap into information generated by collective intelligence to expand our understanding of ourselves and the technologically-mediated world we inhabit. (New Media Consortium & Educause, 2008, p. 4)

## **Current and Emerging Technologies**

College distance learning programs are challenged to understand and embrace technologies that are developing with increasing pace, complexity, and capability. Colleges must look beyond application or implementation and think strategically with deliberate planning for technology's evolving role in teaching and learning. Bates (2000) contends that "the biggest challenge [in distance learning] is the lack of vision and the failure to use technology strategically" (p. 7).

There are broad reaching factors related to technological change that influence distance learning programs and the entire community college paradigm. Concerning these fundamental changes underway, Beaudoin (2003) suggests:

Institutional decision makers need to be informed and enlightened enough to ask fundamental questions that could well influence their institution's future viability. How many faculty will we be needed in ten years? Will the notion of classrooms survive? Is the present structure of the institution viable? Will teachers and students need to meet on campus anymore? Can the organization's decision makers respond to new competitors? (§ 4)

The consumer technology market continues to affect the distance learning environment as students embrace new technologies and seek to use them for distance learning as a matter of convenience and access. In the 2007 annual report from the EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research (ECAR), students report that technology helps them in their classes to communicate, collaborate, and have greater control of course activities (Salaway, G., Caruso, J.B., & Nelson, M.R., 2007). Student use of technology continues to grow, as detailed in the 2007 ECAR report, which notes that more students have laptops, smart phones, wireless high speed internet links, and social networking sites such as Facebook or MySpace. In the 2007 annual national survey of mostly full time college students, the following technologies are now common to the majority of students.

- 98% of students own a computer, for 74% of students the computer is a laptop, and 36% of students have both a desktop and laptop.
- 98% of students have a cell phone.
- 92% of students have high speed Internet access.
- 75% of students own an electronic music/video device (iPod, etc.)
- 99.9% of students use email.
- 82% of students have used distance learning course management systems.
- 69% of students use social networking sites.
- 59% of younger college students use instant messaging.
- 72% of students like to learn using Internet searches.
- 53% of students like to learn using games and simulations.  
(adapted from Salaway, G., Caruso, J.B., & Nelson, M.R., 2007)

New technologies on the horizon will influence the distance learning environment and student expectations. The New Media Consortium publishes an annual study, *The Horizon Report*, to identify emerging technologies that will likely have an impact in higher education. Listed below are emerging technologies from the 2006, 2007, and 2008 reports.

- Social computing—the application of computer technology to facilitate interaction and collaboration.
- Personal broadcasting—the ability to post online personal audio and video material such as podcasts, video blogs, or videos on YouTube or other video content sharing sites.
- Smart cell phones—cell phones with email and web browsing capability, essentially portable computers.
- Educational gaming—computer games and simulations specifically designed to promote engagement and cooperation in problem solving.

- Augmented reality and enhanced visualization—immersive and/or three-dimensional representations of educational content to enhance learning and skills acquisition.
- Virtual worlds—provide online virtual spaces that mirror the real world and allow users to collaborate, explore, role-play, and experience other situations in a safe but compelling way.
- Grassroots video—the ability to simply and cheaply create and share short video clips online at video sharing web sites such as YouTube.
- Collaborative web sites—allow groups of users to hold online meetings and post, share, and edit documents collaboratively.
- Mobile broadband—high speed data networks for cell phones and other portable devices, enabling mobile access to multimedia.
- Data mashups—online applications that allow combinations of data from different sources to be “mashed” into a single tool, enabling new ways for understanding and interacting with datasets.
- Social operating systems—networking tools that base the organization of the network on human relationships and connections rather than content. (adapted from New Media Consortium & Educause, 2006, 2007, 2008)

The above trends, challenges, changing learning paradigms, and emerging technologies pose numerous issues, challenges, and opportunities for community college distance learning programs. Appropriate administrative conditions and services need to be developed with consideration of these factors in order to develop a sustainable distance learning program that addresses trends and challenges associated with the changing marketplace and while also anticipating the technology-driven evolution of paradigms for teaching, learning and credentialing the online learning environment.

## **SUMMARY**

This study focuses on solutions for the issues experienced by the distance learning program at the Lone Star College System, a multi-college community college district



located north of the Houston metro area. The administrative conditions and services for a sustainable distance learning program need to address the trends and challenges associated with the changing marketplace and anticipate the technology-driven evolution of paradigms for teaching, learning and credentialing the online learning environment. Market and technology trends and associated challenges underscore the importance of exploring options for organizing an effective online community college distance learning program and associated services that contribute to student success in an efficient and consistent manner, while continually responding to technological advancements that affect the online environment, learning paradigms, and student expectations. Using practical action research methodology, the study involves an exploration of the administrative and governance structure, a review of services provided to distance learning faculty and students, and an examination of quality standards for online courses and services.

## **Chapter Two: Review of Literature**

This study focuses on the administrative conditions and services that should be established in a multi-campus community college district online distance-learning program to improve the college district's ability to meet current and future distance learning student needs. Therefore the foundation for the research in this study is based on literature regarding distance learning administrative conditions and practices. The research for this study did not concentrate on the majority of the literature in the field that is primarily focused on instructional design and methodology within the online course environment.

Several themes emerged in the review of the literature, providing insights from the systemic level to more specific aspects of distance learning administrative conditions and services. Therefore the review of the literature below is organized within the following three themes: a) principles and practices, b) quality criteria and benchmarks, and c) recommendations, strategies, and success factors.

### **PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES**

Several national organizations and accreditation agencies have contributed guidelines for principles and practices that should be sustained in distance learning programs.

#### **American Council on Education (ACE)**

To assist institutions in responding to the accelerating advancements in technology while maintaining their larger mission, the American Council on Education (1996) assembled a national task force with the charge to formulate a set of broad

principles that could guide learners, educators, trainers, technologists, accreditors, and state regulators in the development, delivery, and assessment of distance learning. This researcher served as a member of the task force representing community colleges. Our goal was to reflect on the core values that sustain a learning society and to formulate principles that sustain those values, address the effects of technology advancements on education and training, and provide insights on how quality can be assured in the development of student centered distance learning programs. The ACE (1996) task force formulated the following values assumptions and guiding principles.

### ***Core Values***

It is assumed that the practice of distance learning contributes to the larger social mission of education and training in a democratic society.

- Learning is a lifelong process, important for successful participation in a democratic society.
- Lifelong learning involves the development of skills and behaviors that are outcomes of learning activities.
- Diversity of learners, needs, modalities, and contexts must be recognized.
- All members of society have a right to access learning opportunities.
- All participants in the learning process have both rights and responsibilities.
- Learning is social and sensitive to context, so learning experiences need to support interaction and the development of learning communities.
- Roles, responsibilities, and activities for all participants in the learning process may evolve and change over time as a learning society develops.

### ***Learning Design***

Distance learning activities are designed to fit the specific context for learning (subject matter, intended outcomes, environment, needs and goals of the learner, instructional technologies and methods).

### ***Learner Support***

Distance learning opportunities are effectively supported for learners through fully accessible modes of delivery and resources. Technology support, library services, and student services are accessible and convenient.

### ***Organizational Commitment***

Distance learning initiatives must be backed by an organizational commitment to quality and effectiveness in all aspects of the learning environment (college mission, financial and administrative support, policies, research, evaluation, and professional development).

### ***Learning Outcomes***

Distance education programs organize learning activities around demonstrable learning outcomes, assist the learner to achieve these outcomes, and assess learner progress by reference to these outcomes. Technology facilitates achievement, and assessment is timely.

### ***Technology***

The provider has a plan and infrastructure for using technology that support its learning goals and activities. Technology is easy to use, accessible, understandable, and has the capacity to support the learning activities. Security, integrity and validity of information are maintained. Training is provided. (adapted from ACE, 1996)

## **American Distance Education Consortium (ADEC)**

In 1996, the member colleges and universities of ADEC reviewed case studies of best practices to identify the principles that should be applicable for all types of distance learning technologies. They published the ADEC Guiding Principles for Distance Learning (2002), with the following standards for best practice.

### **1. *Design for active and effective learning.***

Principle: Distance learning designs consider:

- specific context;
- needs, learning goals, and other characteristics of the learners;
- nature of the content;
- appropriate instructional strategies and technologies;
- desired learning outcome;
- local learning environment.

### **2. *Support the needs of learners.***

Principle: Distance learning opportunities are effectively and flexibly supported, including:

- initial disclosure of information on the learning opportunities;
- orientation to the process of learning at a distance, including use of technologies for learning;
- site and tutorial support;
- student advising and counseling;
- provision of technical support and library and information services;
- problem-solving assistance.

**3. *Develop and maintain the technological and human infrastructure.***

Principle: The provider of distance learning opportunities has both a technology plan and a human infrastructure to ensure that:

- appropriate technical requirements are established;
- compatibility needs are met;
- technology at origination and receive sites are maintained to ensure technical quality;
- learners and learning facilitators are supported in their use of these technologies;
- partnering and collaboration are explored as appropriate.

**4. *Sustain administrative and organizational commitment.***

Principle: Distance education initiatives are sustained by an administrative commitment to quality distance education, as indicated by:

- integration of distance education into the mission of the organization;
- financial commitment to accommodate diverse distance learning needs;
- faculty development and reward structures;
- training to support learners, site facilitators, and technicians;
- marketing and management structures to promote and sustain distance education;
- cost-effectiveness reflected through best use of fiscal, technical, and human resources;
- ongoing evaluation and research. (adapted from ADEC, 2002)

## **Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET)**

About the same timeframe that the ACE task force was formulating its guiding principles, the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications in Denver, Colorado began work on the development of principles for electronically delivered degrees and certificates. It was part of a larger initiative in the western states to address state regulations that were limiting student access to distance learning programs that crossed state boundaries.

The resulting document, *Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Academic Degree and Certificate Programs* (WCET, 1999), contains basic quality standards of practice that served as the first nationally accepted basis for evaluating distance learning programs.

### ***Curriculum and Instruction***

- Each program of study results in learning outcomes appropriate to the rigor and breadth of the degree or certificate awarded.
- An electronically offered degree or certificate program is coherent and complete.
- The program provides for appropriate real-time or delayed interaction between faculty and students and among students.
- Qualified faculty provide appropriate oversight of the program electronically offered.

### ***Institutional Context and Commitment***

#### ***Role and Mission***

- The program is consistent with the institution's role and mission.
- Review and approval processes ensure the appropriateness of the technology being used to meet the program's objectives.

### *Faculty Support*

- The program provides faculty support services specifically related to teaching via an electronic system.
- The program provides training for faculty who teach via the use of technology.

### *Resources for Learning*

- The program ensures that appropriate learning resources are available to students.

### *Students and Student Services*

- The program provides students with clear, complete, and timely information on the curriculum, course and degree requirements, nature of faculty/student interaction, assumptions about technological competence and skills, technical equipment requirements, availability of academic support services and financial aid resources, and costs and payment policies.
- Enrolled students have reasonable and adequate access to the range of student services appropriate to support their learning.
- Accepted students have the background, knowledge, and technical skills needed to undertake the program.
- Advertising, recruiting, and admissions materials clearly and accurately represent the program and the services available.

### *Commitment to Support*

- Policies for faculty evaluation include appropriate consideration of teaching and scholarly activities related to electronically offered programs.
- The institution demonstrates a commitment to ongoing support, both financial and technical, and to continuation of the program for a period sufficient to enable students to complete a degree/certificate.



### ***Evaluation and Assessment***

- The institution evaluates the program's educational effectiveness, including assessments of student learning outcomes, student retention, and student and faculty satisfaction. Students have access to such program evaluation data.
- The institution provides for assessment and documentation of student achievement in each course and at completion of the program. (adapted from WCET, 1999)

### **Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB)**

In 1997 the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) adopted the WCET principles for use by all colleges and universities in the state of Texas.

### **Southern Regional Education Board (SREB)**

In 1998 the WCET guidelines were adopted, with several additions, by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) to serve as a guide to the SREB's *Electronic Campus* for developing and distributing distance learning programs across boundaries of member states. The SREB's (2004) *Principles of Good Practice* added the following points to the WCET list above to provide additional clarity regarding responsibilities for sharing programs and students between or among institutions.

### ***Curriculum and Instruction***

- Academic standards for all programs or courses offered electronically are the same as those for other courses or programs delivered at the institution where they originate.
- Student learning in programs or courses delivered electronically should be comparable to student learning in programs or courses offered at the campus where they originate.

### ***Institutional Context and Commitment***

#### ***Faculty Support***

- The program or course provides faculty with adequate equipment, software and communications for interaction with students, institutions and other faculty.

#### ***Resources for Learning***

- The program or course evaluates the adequacy of access to learning resources and the cost to students for access to those resources. It also documents the use of electronic resources.

#### ***Students and Student Services***

- The institution has admission/acceptance criteria to assess whether students have the background, knowledge, and technical skills needed to undertake the program.

### ***Evaluation and Assessment***

- Program or course announcements and electronic catalog entries provide appropriate information. (adapted from SREB, 2004)

### **Regional Accrediting Commissions**

The WCET guidelines for good practice were again subsequently used as the foundation for the development of accreditation guidelines now in use by all regional accrediting associations in the United States.

### **BENCHMARKS AND QUALITY CRITERIA**

Building on principles with a focus on practice, or principles in action, other studies have identified and recommended benchmark strategies and quality criteria in use by colleges and universities offering online distance learning programs and courses.

## **The Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP)**

A landmark study from The Institute for Higher Education Policy (Merisotis, J.P. & Phipps, R.A., 2000) involved a three-phase approach to identify and validate benchmarks specifically for online distance learning programs. In the first phase of the study, literature was comprehensively reviewed to compile a list of 45 practices previously recommended by organizations, experts in the field, or professional groups. Six leading online distance learning institutions were then identified and studied to determine which of the recommended practices were actually incorporated into practice via institutional policies and procedures. The IHEP researchers then conducted interviews with staff, faculty and students at these institutions to gauge their perspective on which of the benchmarks were present and/or important for ensuring quality in their distance learning programs. From these research efforts emerged a final list of 24 benchmarks, grouped into seven categories, which were deemed essential for successful online distance learning programs. The Institute for Higher Education Policy's resulting publication, *Quality On the Line: Benchmarks for Success in Internet-based Distance Education*, (Merisotis, J.P. & Phipps, R.A., 2000) details the following benchmarks of practice.

### ***Institutional Support Benchmarks***

- A documented technology plan that includes electronic security measures (i.e., password protection, encryption, back-up systems) is in place and operational to ensure both quality standards and the integrity and validity of information.
- The reliability of the technology delivery system is as failsafe as possible.
- A centralized system provides support for building and maintaining the distance education infrastructure.

### ***Course Development Benchmarks***

- Guidelines regarding minimum standards are used for course development, design, and delivery, while learning outcomes—not the availability of existing technology—determine the technology being used to deliver course content.
- Instructional materials are reviewed periodically to ensure they meet program standards.
- Courses are designed to require students to engage themselves in analysis, synthesis, and evaluation as part of their course and program requirements.

### ***Teaching/Learning Benchmarks***

- Student interaction with faculty and other students is an essential characteristic and is facilitated through a variety of ways, including voice-mail and/or e-mail.
- Feedback to student assignments and questions is constructive and provided in a timely manner.
- Students are instructed in the proper methods of effective research, including assessment of the validity of resources.

### ***Course Structure Benchmarks***

- Before starting an online program, students are advised about the program to determine (1) if they possess the self-motivation and commitment to learn at a distance and (2) if they have access to the minimal technology required by the course design.
- Students are provided with supplemental course information that outlines course objectives, concepts, and ideas, and learning outcomes for each course are summarized in a clearly written, straightforward statement.
- Students have access to sufficient library resources that may include a “virtual library” accessible through the World Wide Web.

- Faculty and students agree upon expectations regarding times for student assignment completion and faculty response.

### ***Student Support Benchmarks***

- Students receive information about programs, including admission requirements, tuition and fees, books and supplies, technical and proctoring requirements, and student support services.
- Students are provided with hands-on training and information to aid them in securing material through electronic databases, interlibrary loans, government archives, news services, and other sources.
- Throughout the duration of the course/program, students have access to technical assistance, including detailed instructions regarding the electronic media used, practice sessions prior to the beginning of the course, and convenient access to technical support staff.
- Questions directed to student service personnel are answered accurately and quickly, with a structured system in place to address student complaints.

### ***Faculty Support Benchmarks***

- Technical assistance in course development is available to faculty, who are encouraged to use it.
- Faculty members are assisted in the transition from classroom teaching to online instruction and are assessed during the process.
- Instructor training and assistance, including peer mentoring, continues through the progression of the online course.
- Faculty members are provided with written resources to deal with issues arising from student use of electronically-accessed data.

### ***Evaluation and Assessment Benchmarks***

- The program's educational effectiveness and teaching/learning process is assessed through an evaluation process that uses several methods and applies specific standards.

- Data on enrollment, costs, and successful/innovative uses of technology are used to evaluate program effectiveness.
- Intended learning outcomes are reviewed regularly to ensure clarity, utility, and appropriateness. (Merisotis, J.P. & Phipps, R.A., 2000, pp. 25-26)

## **The Sloan Consortium**

The Sloan Consortium has taken a practical action research approach to fostering quality and effective online distance learning programs. Beginning in 1993, institutional and organizational members of the consortium are encouraged to collaboratively share expertise and effective practices via consortium conferences and publications, resulting in a large library of resources for online distance learning practitioners of various academic disciplines. In 2002 the Sloan Consortium (also known as Sloan-C) developed a set of values, goals and ideals for online distance learning which are used as a framework for sharing, measuring and improving distance learning practices. The *Sloan-C™ Framework* (Moore, J.C., 2002) is composed of five pillars of quality.

### ***Learning Effectiveness***

The quality of learning online is comparable to the quality of its traditional programs. Online learning outcomes meet or exceed institutional, industry, and/or community standards.

### ***Cost Effectiveness and Institutional Commitment***

Institutions continuously improve services while reducing costs.

### ***Access***

All learners who wish to learn online have the opportunity to do so, can access learning in a wide variety of programs and courses, and can achieve success.

### ***Faculty Satisfaction***

Faculty achieve success with teaching online, citing appreciation and happiness.

### ***Student Satisfaction***

Students are successful in learning online and are pleased with their online experiences, including interaction with instructors and peers, learning outcomes that match expectations, student services, and orientation. (adapted from Lorenzo, G. & Moore, J.C., 2002; Moore, J.C., 2002, 2005, 2008; The Sloan Consortium, 2002)

The above frameworks and quality concepts from ACE, ADEC, WCET, THECB, SREB, IHEP, and the Sloan Consortium share similarities but also contain inherent differences. Mariasingam and Hanna (2006) propose that the various concepts of quality emerge from multiple perspectives. They contend that a comprehensive set of guidelines and benchmarks is necessary in order to more fully understand and measure the effectiveness of distance learning programs and address the concerns of various perspectives and stakeholders. They present a framework that organizes the benchmarks and quality criteria according to the perspectives of various constituency interests.

***Institutional Requirements***—mission, continuous quality improvement measures, access, evaluation of program effectiveness, student satisfaction, post graduation employment success assessment.

***Learner Requirements***—program suitability, learning effectiveness, cost effectiveness, flexibility for unique and personalized educational experience, cultural contextualization, institutional support for learners.

***Faculty Requirements***—faculty incentives, teaching support, technology support.

***Employer Requirements***—performance objectives for degree programs and continued professional development.

***Society Requirements***—lifelong learning, relevance to society needs, contribution to human resources.

***Government Requirements***—ethical requirements, accreditation requirements, legal and statutory requirements. (Mariasingam, M.A. & Hanna, D.E., 2006)

Benchmarks tend to appear in the literature more as descriptors of administrative conditions and services that should be present in an online distance learning program, while quality criteria are more likely to be addressed in the literature within the context of evaluating the administrative conditions and services of distance learning programs. The perspectives of the two types of guidelines might be described as proactive and reactive, but both benchmarks and criteria are useful in the exercise of considering what administrative conditions and services should be established for an online distance learning program in a multi-campus community college district.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS, STRATEGIES, SUCCESS FACTORS**

Prester and Moller (2001) recommend using Rummler and Brache's (1990) Organizational Alignment Model as a framework for analyzing, structuring, and managing distance learning processes and services. The framework is composed of a nine cell matrix (see Table 2.1 below) with a synopsis of recommendations for each cell of the matrix listed below (adapted from Prester, G.E. & Moller, L.A., 2001).

***Cell 1: Organization Goals.*** Use a balanced approach to goal setting based on the college's critical success factors. Assess needs of distance learning stakeholders. Communicate goals and measures.

***Cell 2: Process Goals.*** Benchmark workflows using IHEP's (Merisotis, J.P. & Phipps, R.A., 2000) 24 benchmarks.



**Cell 3: Work/Worker Goals.** Write or re-write job descriptions based on required roles and competencies. Link operational goals to a reward system.

**Cell 4: Structuring the Organization.** Align structure with college goals and resources. Prestera and Moller (2001) refer to Mark's (1990) four distance learning structure models—program, unit, institution, and consortium—and support Sachs' (1999) recommendation for the unit structure, listing the following benefits.

- Receives permanent status;
- Is allocated a budget;
- Has formal representation on committees;
- Serves the entire college or university;
- Pools distance education resources and knowledge;
- Scalability – can expand or contract as needed;
- Allows for economies of scale;
- Allows for development of complete degree programs. (p. 68)

**Cell 5: Structuring the Processes.** To achieve consistency, compare current processes operationalized through policy and procedure against benchmarked best practices from other successful programs and then make adjustments and corrections. Empower faculty in the course development process as participants in course development teams with designers and technologists.

**Cell 6: Structuring the Job.** Structure the distance learning program to allow flexibility and responsiveness to changing external environments, and to optimize quality and efficiency. Staff and consultants can be permanent or contractual and may include producers, instructional designers, technologists, graphic artists, librarians, and other specialists.

**Cell 7: Managing the Organization.** Use a framework to conduct a cost analysis. Identify the benefits and goals to be achieved.

**Cell 8: Managing the Processes.** Distance learning design and delivery processes should be benchmarked against best practices and standards. Assess the type and amount of resource usage. Assess the efficiency of workflows to achieve better quality from the same effort.

**Cell 9: Managing the Job/Workers.** Provide feedback mechanisms and evaluate staff based on individual and team performance standards.

Table 2.1

*Prester and Moller's Organizational Alignment Model for Distance Learning Support*

	Goals	Structure	Management
Organization	<b>Cell 1</b> – Establish balanced scorecard with goals that are aligned with the institution's mission.	<b>Cell 4</b> – Determine the size and scope of the distance education organization.	<b>Cell 7</b> – Assess student and organizational needs. Evaluate results through cost/benefit analysis.
Process	<b>Cell 2</b> – Benchmark processes by identifying best practices for instructional design, development, and delivery of online courses.	<b>Cell 5</b> – Use benchmarks to set process standards and develop policies and practices to support performance.	<b>Cell 8</b> – Evaluate processes to determine standard resource usage levels. Use feedback to improve efficiency and quality.

Job/ Performer	<b>Cell 3</b> – Identify roles needed, responsibilities, and outputs. Tie performance goals to reward system.	<b>Cell 6</b> – Develop a workflow design that supports best practices.	<b>Cell 9</b> – Set employee performance standards, measure results, and use feedback to improve performance.
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Source: (Prester, G.E. & Moller, L.A., 2001)

From a separate review of research articles, Levy (2003) summarized six factors from the literature that should be considered when developing an online distance learning program—vision and planning, curriculum, staff training and support, student services, student training and support, and copyright and intellectual property. She also noted that a change in college and distance learning structures could occur due to evolving marketplace demands and/or partnerships. Levy further noted a trend toward the changing role of the distance learning instructor as development tasks are unbundled and handled via a course development team approach. Levy warns that colleges need adequate budgeting to respond to the above considerations.

With the ever increasing complexity and capability of technology, the Pennsylvania State University's World Campus (Ragan, L.C. & Terheggen, S.L., 2003) conducted research of proven strategies developed by experienced distance learning practitioners that help manage workload while also enabling the incorporation of an increasing variety of online tools and methods. A series of discussions, surveys and a four-day workshop with a national group of distance learning faculty, instructional designers, and administrators resulted in the development of a list of course development strategies, teaching strategies, course revision and improvement strategies, and

institutional strategies (Ragan, L.C. & Terheggen, S.L., 2003). Those applicable to this study are listed below.

***Course Development Strategies.*** Adopt a course authoring model with a standardized set of primary course components. Identify and acquire existing learning resources. Establish and distribute reusable templates for course development, administration, orientation, and evaluation. Provide course authors with a successfully designed and developed sample online course. Apply project planning and management methods to course development. Establish a course development team. Create a learning object database.

***Teaching Strategies.*** Clarify and enhance students' prerequisite technical skills before students register. Establish a learning management system for tracking and recording course activities. Foster group dynamics and interaction.

***Course Revision and Improvement Strategies.*** Conduct multiple evaluations of each course. Conduct a pilot run of the course. Utilize external expert reviews where appropriate. Plan for the process of revision in the initial course design. Develop methods to manage dynamic course elements such as textbook references and web links. Invite student feedback at the close of the course. Develop and maintain a course history to archive and capture course improvements and student feedback. Include the original course author in the revision process. Reward students for reporting errors in the course.

***Institutional Strategies.*** Ensure faculty access to instructional design and systems support. Provide faculty development opportunities. Provide technical support to faculty and students. Provide an adequate learning management system. Establish institutional parameters for online course offerings, such as appropriateness, class caps, phase schedules, number of sections offered, etc. Integrate institutional administrative systems and tools for registration, student records, and support services. Provide policies covering

intellectual property. Define the role of online learning in the college mission. Develop faculty compensation policy for online instruction. Provide copyright and permissions support and policies. (adapted from Ragan, L.C. & Terheggen, S.L., 2003)

From a survey among 62 department chairs from various land grant institutions in the United States, Schauer et al. (2005) developed a ranked list of eight issues impacting administrative decisions when developing a distance learning program.

***Faculty***—workload, incentives, compensation, acceptance, awareness, etc.;

***Technology***—support, appropriateness, reliability, access, literacy, security;

***Setting Distance Education Direction***—shared vision, acceptance, leadership, planning, pace, marketing;

***Finance***—budgeting, grants, funding formula, revenues;

***Student Issues***—learning communities, interactions, library access, administrative services, help desk, student services, financial aid;

***Quality and Effectiveness***—course standards, academic integrity, assessment, effectiveness, enrollments, evaluations;

***Policy and Governance***—intellectual property, articulation, calendar, partnerships, acceptable use policy, ADA compliance, collective bargaining;

***Regulatory and Legal***—copyright, partnerships, accreditation, state board regulations, taxing regulations, federal regulations. (adapted from Schauer, J., Rockwell, S.K., Fritz, S.M., & Marx, D.B., 2005)

Olliver (2004) recounts lessons learned from the experience of St. Petersburg College developing its distance learning program. He lists twelve recommendations for developing and sustaining an online distance learning program.

- Verify centrality to mission;
- Build institutional commitment;

- Recognize pedagogical differences;
- Invest in instructional development and training, such as faculty mentors and a course development team;
- Establish a single point of contact, centralized with its own identity and staff;
- Provide a full range of electronic student services;
- Develop a stable and robust technical infrastructure and support network, including student self-assessments;
- Engage in ongoing marketing and market research, via websites, surveys, focus groups, newsletters, and sharing research on best practices;
- Embrace accountability and an ongoing quest for quality, including regular course reviews and updates (every 3 years), tracking retention and success rates, and student evaluations;
- Be realistic about costs, create a distance learning fee, and use a costing model such as WCET's Technology Costing Methodology Model (Jones, D., 2004);
- Do not make it more complicated than it really is, adopt and adapt from others rather than reinventing all processes;
- Recognize the rapid rate of change in E-Learning will impact technology and enrollments. (adapted from Olliver, J., 2004)

## **SUMMARY**

The literature review has examined three themes providing insights into administrative conditions and services needed for a community college distance learning program. First, principles and practices were reviewed from national organizations, state and regional organizations, and accrediting agencies. Second, quality criteria and benchmarks were reviewed from the Institute for Higher Education Policy and the Sloan Consortium. Benchmarks tend to appear in the literature more as descriptors of administrative conditions and services that should be present in an online distance

learning program, while quality criteria were more likely to be addressed in the literature within the context of evaluating the administrative conditions and services of distance learning programs. Both benchmarks and criteria are useful in the exercise of considering what administrative conditions and services should be established for an online distance learning program in a multi-campus community college district. Additionally, several studies provided general recommendations, strategies, and success factors that are important to consider in establishing a distance learning program.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

As briefly mentioned in Chapter One, this study employs the practical action research methodology within the community college context. As the practitioner researcher, I accept Guba and Lincoln's (1998) concept of paradigms of human constructions, and so I will discuss in this chapter not only the methodology chosen for the study, but also the context for my ontological and epistemological assumptions and values that have guided me toward the chosen methodology. My assumption is that having a research project that makes sense to me is of little use to others unless I communicate to the reader what my assumptions about reality and knowledge are. "Inevitably, we bring a number of assumptions to our chosen methodology. We need, as best we can, to state what these assumptions are" (Crotty, M., 1998, p. 7).

### **POSITIONALITY**

As the practitioner researcher for this study, I am an employee at the Lone Star College System, and thus I am an insider to the research. I have worked within the field of higher education for 24 years at several institutions, with experience in building and managing multiple distance learning programs utilizing various technologies. For this particular study, as an employee of LSCS I serve as the resource person for a college district task force that is charged by the college system's chancellor with studying the LSCS distance learning program and submitting an administrative report for his review. A final draft of the doctoral study will also be submitted to the chancellor.



## **RESEARCH QUESTION**

The study uses practical action research methodology to answer the question:

What administrative conditions and services should be established in a multi-campus community college district online distance-learning program to improve the college district's ability to meet current and future distance learning student needs?

The study specifically focuses on the administrative aspects of a distance learning operation in a multi-college district. It does not explore the pedagogical considerations of online instructional delivery and methods, but rather the administrative and support services that might better support the faculty and students within an online environment managed by a multi-college district.

## **ONTOLOGY**

Ontology is defined as the study of conceptions of reality and the nature of being (Wikipedia, 2008c). Guba and Lincoln (1998) ask the ontological question, "What is the form and nature of reality and, therefore, what is there that can be known about it" (p. 201)? According to McNiff and Whitehead (2006) ontology means 'a theory of being' (p. 10). They further state:

Ontology is the study of being. Our ontologies influence how we view ourselves in our relationships with others. The ontological commitments that underpin action research include the following.

- Action research is value laden.
- Action research is morally committed.
- Action researchers perceive themselves as in relation with one another in their social contexts. (p. 23)

I believe that there are various concepts of ‘being’ and that there is a difference between realities, knowings, and meanings. From the standpoint of realism, I accept that there is a reality in the natural world, whether or not I am aware of it or understand it. From the standpoint of relativism, I also accept that the concept of ‘being’ is a human construction that is influenced by culture, experience, history, and a variety of other factors that are commonly studied in the social sciences. I interpret that the natural world and the human world are experienced and understood both tangibly and metaphysically.

My view of the world: I think a natural world and universe exists and functions according to natural ‘laws’ that we attempt to understand and which we explain through dominant theories that remain ‘accepted’ either because they produce consistent results or because they have otherwise not yet been disproved. I also think that humans construct meanings, knowings, rules, values, and ethics that are intangible things and yet they exist because we choose to sustain them. Our mental constructions are very much influenced or filtered or painted by our relationships, experience, and learning, which in turn are shaped by society and culture (and vice versa), and which likewise are manipulated by power structures. Our challenge is to remain self-aware of the variety of influences that shape our knowings.

## **VALUES**

Values are also an important factor to consider for practical action research, which as mentioned above is value laden, not value agnostic (McNiff, J. & Whitehead, J., 2006). “People’s values are part of their ontological perspectives, ...so how we perceive ourselves (our theory of being) can influence how we perceive others and our environment” (McNiff, J. & Whitehead, J., 2006). As the practitioner researcher in a

community college setting, I will share several values and principles that I view as important in the community college experience.

*Community.* To fulfill the community college mission, the college leader must develop a healthy community at the institution that enables employees and faculty to better assist learners, and empowers learners to complete their academic goals and improve their lives. “In the building of [college] community, strong presidential leadership is required” (Commission on the Future of Community Colleges, 1988, p. 42). The health and sustainability of the college community should be evident in the outcomes of its processes and in the behaviors of its students, faculty, and staff. Community is a powerful social force in the community college and in any other aspect of the human experience.

According to Bogue (2002) in the broader sense, “Shared purpose, shared commitment, shared relationships, shared responsibility – the need for community is a primal yearning and a practical necessity in our lives and in our society” (p. 3).

*Freedoms and unfreedoms.* Strong and sustainable community colleges provide freedoms, openness, inclusiveness, and opportunities for participation. Sen (1999b) views the development of a healthy community as an integrated effort to expand freedoms. He also emphasizes the importance of removing “unfreedoms” (p. 3) from society, such as poverty, tyranny, repression, deprivation, or other influences that limit choices and opportunities. Freedoms are necessary to develop and sustain strong learning communities and organizations. “Freedoms are not only the primary ends of development, they are also among its principal means” (Sen, A., 1999b, p. 10).

These ideas are relevant for the development of a healthy and sustainable community and culture within a community college. The community college ethos should protect and improve upon freedoms and choices for students while eliminating from the

college culture the unfreedoms that historically have diminished the self-confidence and academic success of minority and under-prepared students – unfreedoms such as prejudices, lack of understanding, negative labels, low expectations, or pedagogical inflexibility.

A healthy college community sustains basic learning needs and freedoms, and allows individuals to thrive and fulfill their potential, while also successfully instilling the values and actions of responsibility associated with being citizen members of the college and society. Community college faculty, staff, and students hopefully share a common desire to sustain the college because its collective worth is understood and honored. A college community becomes self-sustaining because its participants and stakeholders realize that they are more complete participating within the college community than outside it. As in Capra's (2004) biological cell analogy, a healthy community, like the living organism, is greater than the sum of its parts due to the interdependent nature of its subsystems and members sustaining one another within it. Black (1999) describes this enhanced value to subsystems and individuals in terms of increased capacity for productivity, creativity, and interactive capacity with the environment.

A healthy community college culture likewise sustains freedoms and promotes fulfillment of personal potential, while also recognizing the synergy of group projects and purpose-centered learning. An effective and sustainable community college culture demonstrates this through diverse teaching and learning strategies and environments, promotion of critical thinking, service learning, contextual learning, student cohorts, group learning activities, and development of individual responsibility.

*Mission and purpose.* Individual members and functional areas in a healthy community college community understand and support the college purpose and mission. This notion could represent a challenge for the community college that does not affirm its

mission and purpose openly. Wolfe (1989) explains that when the City University of New York (CUNY) eased its admissions rules, the actions had unanticipated effects on institutional loyalty. The more open admissions rules removed the perception that joining CUNY required special qualities of character, and so the new rules diminished the value of group membership for all entering students.

A decline not only in academic standards but also in the meaning of the experience of education followed, not because poor and minority students took advantage of open admissions (actually the policy, especially at my own institution, led to a rise in the number of lower-middle-class whites who otherwise would have attended religious schools) but because no criteria of entry existed to define who we were and so commit us to be obligated in some sense toward one another. (p. 250)

A distinctive educational mission, therefore, is fundamentally important to building community in the community college (Wells, C.A., 2002). As an open-door institution, developing a healthy culture within the community college necessitates advancing a sense of value in group membership that is not based on elite or special segregating character qualities, but rather, is grounded on democracy, equal access to opportunity, and successful attainment of goals.

Motivation for participation at the community college draws on the principles of democracy and freedom, equal opportunity, and the conviction that everyone has the ability to improve his or her lot in life. The belief in the capability for all to succeed in fulfilling their various potentials should be the foundation for valuing membership in the community college. The community college should “offer the prospect that personal values will be clarified, that individual competence and confidence will be enhanced, and that the channels of our common life will be deepened and renewed” (Commission on the Future of Community Colleges, 1988, p. 49).

*Humanity and caring.* In a well-developed college community, values such as respect for others and the dignity of life and freedom are rooted, and they generate a spirit of cooperation and mutual concern in all activities and processes in the college. Members of the college learn from one another and reciprocate additional strength to one another. College academic and service departments understand their interdependence and avoid actions that enlarge their individual importance or rewards in an unjust manner or at the expense other areas. There is a concern at the college for the individual and cooperative efforts are extended to help all members (students and employees) of the college enjoy personal progress and successfully endure trials and challenges. There is a realization that the good for one is beneficial to the good of all. Reciprocity exists for the good of all participants in the college community, rather than for a group of independent members who act out of self-interest.

The community college culture should adhere to the values of dignity, freedom, cooperation, responsibility, and concern. The values should be manifest through the instructional process and the manner in which student and community services are delivered. A healthy, balanced community college culture values equally the instructional mission as well as the need to provide student support services to develop the personhood and preparedness of students. Faculty and staff should view the student holistically and share responsibilities in educational and developmental efforts, while avoiding elitism or other attitudes that tend to compartmentalize faculty and staff duties or roles.

*Sustainable and balanced.* McNiff and Whitehead (2006) refer to sustainability as the concept of living systems that have the capacity for the interdependent self-renewal that is critical for continuing development. The community college can attain interdependence, endure crises, absorb challenges, and remain sustainable if it exhibits effectiveness in fulfilling its mission to society at large, i.e. developing trained graduates

or completers who then can contribute reciprocally to society as responsible citizens in the larger community context. Support for the college from other societal institutions should then be affirmed reciprocally as the community college effectively provides community services and produces graduates and completers who contribute strength and sustainability to other institutions in society through employment (the market or economy) and through civic participation (the government or state).

Wolfe (1989) described this reciprocal equilibrium in a broader societal sense as a balance between the subsystems of market, state, and civil society. As another expression of balance in society, our nation's founding fathers held the belief that a moral and responsible citizenry was necessary for sustaining a democratic republic (Bellah, R., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W., Swindler, A., & Tipton, S., 1991). Development of a strong community in the community college requires a similar reciprocal balance among internal subsystems, such as academics, student support services, and community services, each steered toward a common goal of student success. Balance is achievable at the community college through an annual planning cycle that allocates resources to services and programs that substantiate through evidence that they improve student success (Roueche, J.E., Ely, E.E., & Roueche, S.D., 2001).

Establishing an institutional culture of collaboration that is shaped by the purposeful interaction of staff, faculty, and members of the larger community requires a paradigm shift—a shift reflected through strategic plans that direct the use of resources and personnel. (Moore, B.L. & Carter, A.W., 2002, p. 22)

*Democracy.* Within the college community, democracy should be embraced as a value and a system for defining and defending freedoms, access, options, and potentials. Democracy is supported in the governmental context of the community. Speaking of the larger governmental and societal context, Sen (1999a) explains, “The practice of democracy gives citizens an opportunity to learn from one another, and helps society to

form its values and priorities” (p. 10). According to Sen democracy is, therefore, a key enabler for development of healthy communities, which includes college communities. It sustains freedoms, openness, inclusiveness, and participation for all members of the college.

The community college exhibits democracy and freedom through equal access to academics and services, academic freedom of expression in the classroom, and, more importantly, through equal access to the potential for development and success. Education depends on democracy, and a democratic society requires an educated populace.

*Discipline and responsibility.* Democracy without discipline is difficult to sustain. Rights and responsibilities should be balanced in the college setting. Civic responsibilities like honesty, self-reliance, participation in the democratic process, and devotion to the common good are essential to sustaining any community, including a community college organization. To sustain and enhance the health of any community, its individual members must feel a responsibility for the welfare of others and for the good of the community as a whole (Oaks, D.H., 1984).

The community college can develop a strong community as it encourages balanced rights and responsibilities through codes of student conduct; clarification of roles of students, faculty, and staff; and development of student organizations, student governance, and participatory opportunities for students in college planning, program reviews, and campus services.

*Community college as subsystem of society.* A strong society is composed of viable subsystems that reinforce and support the values and purpose of the community. These subsystems address spirituality, education, finance, manufacturing and production, health, infrastructure, distribution, commerce, transportation and mobility, representation,



enforcement, and law. Societal subsystems are identified also by human relationships, such as friends, family, clubs, organizations, or by spatial boundaries, such as a neighborhood, town, county, state, or nation.

A sustainable society must have a strong educational system that is accessible to all members equally. “Community colleges, through the building of educational and civic relationships, can help both their neighborhoods and the nation become self-renewing” (Commission on the Future of Community Colleges, 1988, p. 6). With a healthy community college system, members of society have the opportunity to be educated in support of their economic security and their functioning as responsible citizens in the community. The community college also affords the educational opportunity to pursue personal interests or other forms of enrichment. A concerned, thoughtful, and informed citizenry sustains a responsive and responsible government (Oaks, D.H., 2004).

Former United States Commissioner of Education, Ernest Boyer (as cited in Bogue, E.G., 2002), touches on several of the above-mentioned conceptions of a community college when he characterizes the college community thusly:

- Purposeful – students and faculty share learning goals.
- Open – nurtures freedom of expression, civility, personal dignity, and reciprocity.
- Just – affirms diversity; eliminates prejudice and arrogance.
- Disciplined – courtesy, privacy, code of conduct exists; individuals accept obligations to the group; governance guides behavior for the common good.
- Caring – students connected to the campus and one another; service is noble.
- Celebrative – heritage, traditions, ceremonies connect with students.

The community college should be a key institution of a strong and sustainable democratic society. As such, the same characteristics and values of the overarching society should be apparent in the culture of the community college. “If the college itself

is not a model community, it can not advocate community to others” (Commission on the Future of Community Colleges, 1988, p. 7).

## **EPISTEMOLOGY**

Epistemology is the study of the nature of knowledge. Guba and Lincoln (1998) pose the epistemological question, “What is the nature of the relationship between the knower or would-be knower and what can be known” (p. 201)? How one answers this question depends on how one has already answered the ontological question. McNiff and Whitehead (2006) define epistemology thusly:

Epistemology is to do with how we understand knowledge, and how we come to acquire knowledge. The epistemological assumptions underpinning action research include the following.

- The object of the enquiry is the ‘I’.
- Knowledge is uncertain.
- Knowledge creation is a collaborative process. (p. 26)

As I believe there are various ways of being, I therefore accept that there are also various ways of knowing. I conclude that a universal natural reality exists apart from my awareness of it, and that a human perception of reality exists as a complex set of perceptions and meanings shaped by a lifetime of learning and interaction within one or more cultural contexts.

I find that there is room for understanding and accepting each theoretical perspective. Based on Crotty’s (1998) explanations of epistemologies, I interpret that the natural world and the human world are experienced and understood both tangibly and metaphysically. Crotty’s paradigms provide the philosophical basis for conducting research on multiple aspects of human experience in the context of a natural world on

which we live. Our planet earth is sustainable in accordance with natural laws, some of which we understand. Yet we have constructed a “human” world on this earth that has perhaps more meaning to humans than their natural surroundings. The humanly constructed world is actually pluralistic, consisting of multiple human knowings of realities and perspectives that are influenced by culture and experience. Thus I find that there is room for understanding and accepting the objective epistemology as well as the subjective or transactional epistemology. For the researcher, the choice depends on what aspect of knowing one wishes to understand.

But what kind of a world is there before conscious beings engage with it? Not an intelligible world, many would want to say. Not a world of meaning. It becomes a world of meaning only when meaning-making beings make sense of it. From this point of view, accepting a world, and things in the world, existing independently of our consciousness of them does not imply that meanings exist independently of consciousness, as Guba and Lincoln seem to be saying. The existence of a world without a mind is conceivable. Meaning without a mind is not. Realism in ontology and constructionism in epistemology turn out to be quite compatible. (Crotty, M., 1998, pp. 10-11)

I agree with the postpositivist point of view that there is a reality that exists apart from our awareness of it, and that there is a great deal yet to be discovered about it. I have been calling this the natural world rather than the real world because I don't think the natural world is the only “real” world for humans, even though I believe natural laws supersede human constructions. Using an objectivist epistemology, our theories of the natural sciences can be used to manipulate the laws and elements of nature to provide tools, technologies, conveniences, or comfortable living environments, but we can't change or completely control all the natural laws of the physical world.

The human meanings and perceptions of the natural world are real (for humans) too. I experience the natural world mentally when I interact with it tangibly. But I do not know consciously nor concentrate on the science behind how it is that I am able to

physically interact with it. Unless I study biology, anatomy, physiology, etc., I don't know the science about how it is that I can "sit" my body down onto a chair, how I make myself breathe air, or why or how I sense (i.e. feel or smell) things, etc. My knowledge of the natural world is a summation of my sensory perceptions of it, my interactions with it, and the "objective" knowledge I have constructed of it through the study of not-yet-falsified theories of natural sciences that explain natural phenomena with which humans interact.

But human interaction with the natural world and how meaning is derived from that interaction would be best studied under other frameworks. Crotty's (1998) interpretivist paradigm would be appropriate for shaping a study of human interactions and human constructions. Humans have constructed complex relationships and systems that cannot be tangibly seen except for the tangible things that result from those relationships and systems: friendships, families, local communities, government, education, politics, economics, interest groups, societies, culture, etc. These constructions did not exist outside of our making them, so research efforts need to be conducted under a paradigm that appropriately defines this other reality that we have constructed. From Crotty (1998), the interpretivist, critical theorist, and deconstructivist paradigms would be most often appropriate for studying the reality that humans have made for themselves. Each paradigm seems valid for researching different aspects of the human condition. The interpretivist would focus on understanding the interactions of human systems. The critical theorist focuses on (and changing) political or empowerment issues within human systems. The deconstructivist acknowledges the influence of human "filters" such as culture and/or language upon our perspective of knowledge.

I view my own research as a human endeavor and not strictly a mathematical exercise. The human aspect of it is important and indeed shapes the whole process. As

Crotty states, “Performing the task of explication and explanation is precisely what we are about here. Far from being a theorising that takes researchers from their research, it is a theorising embedded in the research act itself. Without it, research is not research” (Crotty, M., 1998, p. 17). With it, research has more meaning to me.

Because I view education as essentially a social science (a paradigmatic conclusion in itself), I conclude that the interpretivist paradigm is appropriate through which to conduct research or consider opportunities for improvement in the community colleges. For this study of an actual organizational question within a humanly constructed institution, the Lone Star College System, an interpretivist epistemology is appropriate for guiding the study’s methodology.

## **METHODOLOGY**

With consideration for ontology and epistemology, and given that this study is pursued within an actual community college organization for the purpose of exploring options for improvement of its own distance learning program, the practical action research methodology is chosen to guide the study’s action plan. Below is a collection of definitions of action research from various authors in the field.

Practical action research (PAR) embraces the concept that practitioners act as researchers of their own practice. “When someone reflects in action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context” (Schön, D.A., 1983, p. 68). Action research is an investigation conducted by practitioners for the purpose of improving future actions (Sagor, R., 2005). “Action Research is a term for describing a spectrum of activities that focus on research, planning, theorizing, learning, and development. It describes a continuous process of research and learning in the researcher’s long-term relationship with a problem” (Cunningham, J.B., 1993, p. 4).

Action research is a systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives. Unlike traditional experimental/scientific research that looks for generalizable explanations that might be applied to all contexts, action research focuses on specific situations and localized solutions. Action research provides the means by which people in schools, business and community organizations; teachers; and health and human services may increase the effectiveness of the work in which they are engaged. (Stringer, E.T., 2007, p. 1)

Action research is “a multistage type of research designed to yield practical results capable of improving a specific aspect of practice” (James, E.A., Milenkiewicz, M.T., & Bucknam, A., 2008, p. 8). Practical action research considers the content and context of the issue under study. James et al. further explain the importance of practice and reflection in the process or “cycle” of action research.

PAR blends participatory research, defined as research conducted in circumstances where diverse practitioners work together to achieve reliable results. ... PAR offers a practical and effective approach for educators to study, assess, and improve their own practices, because PAR researchers intentionally make positive changes through the action cycle as they progress with the project. While the scientific view insists on absolute quantifiability, the PAR view appreciates subjective reflection as a form of data, giving credence and respect to intuitively driven moments and epiphanies. (James, E.A., Milenkiewicz, M.T., & Bucknam, A., 2008, p. 8)

Action research is intended to result in improved practice (Corey, S.M., 1953). Corey (1953) describes practical action research as the process through which problems are studied in order to evaluate and improve practices. “Action research in education is research undertaken by practitioners in order that they may improve their practices” (p. 141). PAR is an important strategy employed by practitioners to develop the solutions that they eventually must implement.

The studies must be undertaken by those who may have to change the way they do things as a result of the studies. ...Singly and in groups, they must use their imaginations creatively and constructively to identify the

practices that must be changed to meet the needs and demands of modern life, courageously try out those practices that give better promise, and methodically and systematically gather evidence to test their worth. This is the process I call action research. (p. viii)

One of the psychological values of action research is that the people who must, by the very nature of their professional responsibilities, improve their practices are the ones who engage in the research to learn what represents improvement. They themselves try out new and seemingly more promising ways of teaching or supervising or administering, and they study the consequences. (p. 141)

McNiff and Whitehead (2006) describe practical action research as a “form of enquiry that enables practitioners everywhere to investigate and evaluate their work” (p. 7). They state, “Action research can be a powerful and liberating form of professional enquiry because it means that practitioners themselves investigate their own practice as they find ways of living more fully in the direction of their educational values” (p. 8).

Mills (2000) also defines practical action research as a methodology utilized with the purpose of seeking improvements in practice and outcomes for students.

Action research is any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers, principals, school counselors, or other stakeholders in the teaching/learning environment, to gather information about the ways that their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how well their students learn. This information is gathered with the goals of gaining insight, developing reflective practice, effecting positive changes in the school environment (and on educational practices in general), and improving student outcomes and the lives of those involved. (p. 6)

Practical action research combines theory and practice in seamless endeavors. Jean McNiff (1993) describes practical action research within the concept of creative practice, in which theory is interchangeable with, and fuses with practice. McNiff (1993) conceptualizes practical action research as “the search by individuals for their own knowledge—not ‘knowledge about education’ but ‘knowledge of education’; that is, knowledge that is of itself educational” (p. 6). McNiff (1993) perceives the nature of

practical action research as educational enquiries that promote “the creation of personal knowledge” (p. 6). She further advocates the use of practical action research to help practitioners “bring about an improvement of practice through the development of critical awareness” (p. 6). McNiff and her colleague, Jack Whitehead, explain the interconnectedness of theory and practice in practical action research:

There is no separation of practice and theory. Practice (what you do) informs theory (what you think about what you do), and theory (what you think) informs practice (what you are doing). Theory and practice transform continuously into each other in a seamless flow. (McNiff, J. & Whitehead, J., 2005, p. 4)

Practical action research is holistic by nature and can not be engaged for the study of issues or practices without considering the various layers of social context within which the subject of the study is found (Herr, K. & Anderson, G.L., 2005). “Unlike traditional research, action research produces knowledge grounded in local realities that is also useful to local participants” (p. 98).

Kurt Lewin describes action research as an instrument for social action.

The research needed for social practice can best be characterized as research for social management of social engineering. It is a type of action-research, a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, and research leading to social action. Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice. (Lewin, K., 1948, pp. 202-203)

## **Goals of Action Research**

As mentioned above, practical action research is intended to result in improved practice (Corey, S.M., 1953). Various authors have elaborated on the goals of practical action research.



“The goal of action research is to understand what is happening at your own institution and to determine what improvements can be implemented in that context” (Sagor, R., 1992).

McNiff and Whitehead (2006) propose the main social purposes of action research to include the following.

- It aims to improve workplace practices through improving learning.
- It aims to promote the ongoing democratic evaluation of learning and practices.
- It aims to create good social orders by influencing the education of social formations. (p. 32)

According to Mills (2000), action research can be a powerful change agent in education. It can shape attitudes of practitioners toward continuous improvement, and it can foster democratic decision-making.

McNiff (1993) describes action research as an essential process in the practitioner’s pursuit to improve the quality of his/her own life as well as the lives of those whom s/he serves in the schools.

Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (1994, 1999, 2005) summarize the following goals that are commonly agreed upon by the various traditions of action research. This study uses these five goals as a reference for validity.

- (a) The generation of new knowledge,
- (b) The achievement of action-oriented outcomes,
- (c) The education of both researcher and participants,
- (d) Results that are relevant to the local setting, and
- (e) A sound and appropriate research methodology. (2005, p. 54)

## **VALIDITY FOR ACTION RESEARCH**

Practical action research is immersive and holistic. It is value laden and morally committed, seeking improvement in practice. Practitioner researchers are engaged and participatory in the social context under study (McNiff, J. & Whitehead, J., 2006). Thus, practical action research requires research criteria that are uniquely suited and matched to the primary purposes of the research.

If practitioner researchers are to be accepted in a larger dialogue about education, they must develop some inquiry criteria for their research. This is not to say that they need to justify themselves by the same inquiry criteria as academic research, but rather that they must make the case for a different conception of validity. This conception of validity should respond to the purposes and conditions of practitioner research and the uniqueness of its contribution to the dialogue. (Anderson, G.L., Herr, K., & Nihlen, A.S., 1994, p. 29)

Anderson et al. (Anderson, G.L. & Herr, K., 1999; Anderson, G.L., Herr, K., & Nihlen, A.S., 1994; Herr, K. & Anderson, G.L., 2005) provide criteria specifically suited for the goals, values, and processes of practical action research. The criteria consist of five concepts: dialogic validity, outcome validity, catalytic validity, democratic validity, and process validity.

As illustrated in Table 3.1 (next page), Herr and Anderson (2005) linked the five validity criteria (dialogic, outcome, catalytic, democratic, and process) to the following goals commonly associated with the various traditions of action research: a) results that are relevant to the local setting, b) the achievement of action-oriented outcomes, c) a sound and appropriate research methodology, d) the education of both researcher and participants, and e) the generation of new knowledge (p. 54).

Table 3.1

*Anderson and Herr's Goals of Action Research and Validity Criteria*

Goals of Action Research	Quality / Validity Criteria
Results that are relevant to the local setting	Democratic validity
The achievement of action-oriented outcomes	Outcome validity
A sound and appropriate research methodology	Process validity
The education of both researcher and participants	Catalytic validity
The generation of new knowledge	Dialogic and process validity

Source: (Anderson, G.L. & Herr, K., 1999; Herr, K. & Anderson, G.L., 2005)

**Democratic Validity**

Democratic validity refers to ensuring that multiple perspectives are represented in the study to ensure that the interests of various stakeholders are represented and understood. Stated another way, the study produces solutions for that same context from which the study originates (Cunningham, J.B., 1983). It is common to utilize a collaborative process with representatives from the various affected groups or interests participating in the study.

**Outcome Validity**

Did any actions occur as a result of the study, and were they applicable to the problem that was studied? Did the study's results, findings and/or actions support the spiraling nature of action research by leading to new questions for study? A study is considered valid if what is learned can be applied to that same context or situation under review so that the next research cycle is not redundant and moves on to other questions.

This requires research skills and the ability to move individuals and/or the organization toward new actions and improved outcomes.

### **Process Validity**

The study frames and pursues resolutions to problems in such a way as to permit ongoing learning for the individual researchers and the organization. The findings come from reflective reviews of the current practices. Does the data collected in the study answer the questions of the study? Is the study viewing the situation in a critical way, or does the study tend toward self-validation of the status quo? Triangulation, or viewing the situation from multiple perspectives, helps guard against simplistic or non-reflective investigations. It is difficult to achieve outcome validity without process validity.

### **Catalytic Validity**

Catalytic validity is “the degree to which the research process reorients, focuses, and energizes participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it” (Lather, P., 1986, p. 272). Practical action research can reach its transformative potential if the participants of the study are motivated to take action based on the new understandings of the subject of the study, either to affirm certain practices or to change them. In this way, practical action research can serve as a catalyst for change and improvement.

### **Dialogic validity**

The practitioner researchers of the study seek dialogue and feedback from peers via some form of peer review process. It is also common to utilize collaborative inquiry with representatives from the various affected groups or interests participating in the study as a way of providing dialogic validity.

## **MODELS FOR ACTION RESEARCH**

The practical action research process differs from traditional “scientific” research method in that the main focus is directed toward changing the situation rather than understanding it. “The practitioner has an interest in transforming the situation from what it is to something he likes better, he also has an interest in understanding the situation, but it is in the service of his interest in change” (Schön, D.A., 1983). Traditional research seeks findings that can be generalized. Action research seeks findings that help to improve the practice of the researcher within the specific context (Corey, S.M., 1953).

Herr and Anderson (2005) describe action research projects as emergent. They should begin with a clear direction, but also acknowledge that questions, methods, design, and participants may change as the data gathering and analysis processes occur. This is part of the natural action research “spiraling synergism of action and understanding” (Herr, K. & Anderson, G.L., 2005, p. 70).

Lippitt et al. (1958) likewise suggest that practical action research does not typically progress sequentially through each phase of the process or cycle. More than one step may be active at the same time or new information or insights may promote readdressing certain steps of the study. The process also proceeds in a cyclic manner, re-starting as some aspects or issues of the problem are resolved and others are revealed.

Practical action research today is influenced by the work of several researchers credited with major contributions to the field. John Dewey (1910) wrote early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century about concepts later identified as elements of practical action research. He described a series of steps he believed were involved in reflective thinking by practitioners and students, leading to practical solutions. For him, the consequence was some form of conclusion that improved the situation in schools.

According to Schmuck (2006), Dewey advocated that society as a whole would also become more productive as a consequence of schools developing participatory group work skills among students, teaching problem-solving skills, and allowing teachers and students to conduct participatory research studies of their own classrooms.

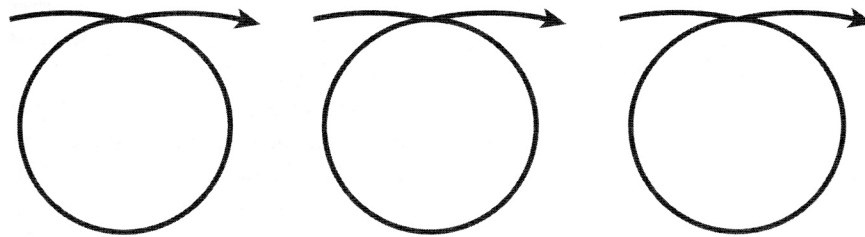
As the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in the 1940s, John Collier was one of the first to refer to action research as a pragmatic methodology for the social sciences. Working to solve issues on Indian reservations, he believed that "... research can be made a tool of action essential to all the other tools" (Collier, J., 1945, p. 275).

Again, since the findings of research must be carried into effect by the administrator and the layman, and must be criticized by them through their experience, the administrator and the layman must themselves participate creatively in the research, impelled as it is from their own area of need. (p. 276)

Kurt Lewin's theories and work are associated with the origins of action research in the United States (Cunningham, J.B., 1993). Lewin was a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany who worked in the U.S. as a social psychologist. He molded his research around iterative investigative cycles designed to improve the efficiencies of organizations (James, E.A., Milenkiewicz, M.T., & Bucknam, A., 2008). Lewin supported a democratic collaborative process for reflective research toward improving practice. According to McNiff and Whitehead (2006), Lewin believed that involving employees in decision-making in the workplace would improve their motivation about their work, so he researched what happened when employees became involved. Lewin also believed the organization benefited and grew through collaboratively involving all employees in implementing and testing strategy. Lewin's model for action research consisted of a circle of three steps consisting of planning—execution—reconnaissance (evaluation). The steps were repeated as a process of continual research and improvement. "Rational social management, therefore, proceeds in a spiral of steps each of which is composed of a

circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the result of the action” (Lewin, K., 1948, p. 206).

Herr and Anderson (2005) describe Lewin’s cycle model as an action research “spiral of iterative cycles of plan-act-observe-reflect” (p. 47). McNiff and Whitehead (2006) attribute Lewin’s ideas as the influence for many action researchers, who organize their work as a cycle of the following steps: observe—reflect—act—evaluate—modify. This process then creates another cycle and can be unending.



*Figure 3.1.* Lewin’s Iterative Cycle Model  
Source: (McNiff, J. & Whitehead, J., 2006)

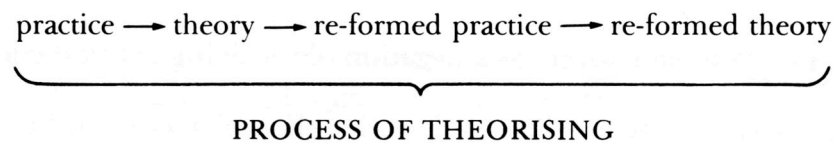
For Corey’s (1953) model of practical action research, the following elements are significant.

1. Identification of a problem area;
2. Selection of a specific problem;
3. Formulation of a hypothesis and goal;
4. Recording of actions taken and evidence to measure goal achievement;
5. Infer relation between the actions and the desired goal;
6. Retest inferences in action situations. (pp. 40-41)

Ron Lippitt was a student of Lewin. Lippitt (1958) expanded upon Lewin's three phases of practical action research and proposes a model with five phases.

1. Development of a need for change ("unfreezing").
2. Establishment of a change relationship.
3. Working toward change ("moving").
4. Generalization and stabilization of change ("freezing").
5. Achieving a terminal relationship. (p. 130)

Whitehead (cited in McNiff, J., 1993, p. 39) describes theory as "an outcome of practice, and is part of an overall strategy of *theorizing* which is a form of practice.



*Figure 3.2.* Whitehead's Process of Theorising [sic]  
Source: (McNiff, J., 1993)

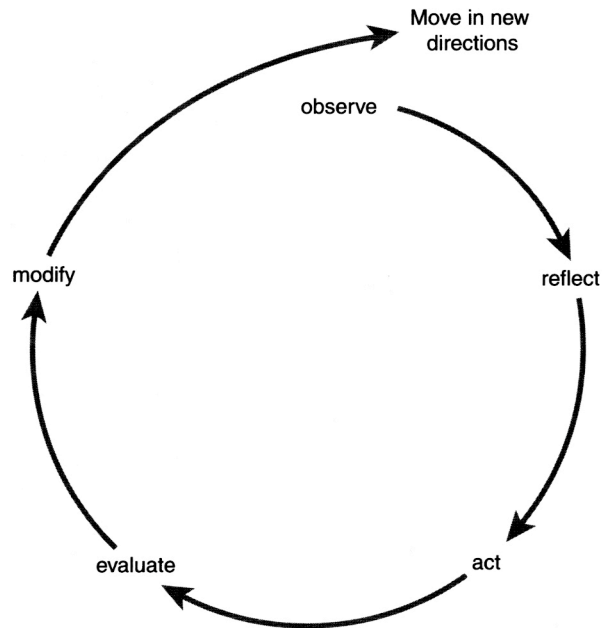
Reflecting a perception that our understanding of educational development is a human construction, Whitehead (1989) employs a five-step framework for practical action research:

1. I experience a problem here when my values and my practice are incongruent;
2. I imagine a solution for my problem;
3. I implement the solution;
4. I evaluate my solution;
5. I modify my ideas and practice in light of the evaluation.





McNiff and Whitehead (2006) describe Whitehead's practical action research framework as an action-reflection cycle with six steps: "observe—reflect—act—evaluate—modify—move in new directions" (p. 9).

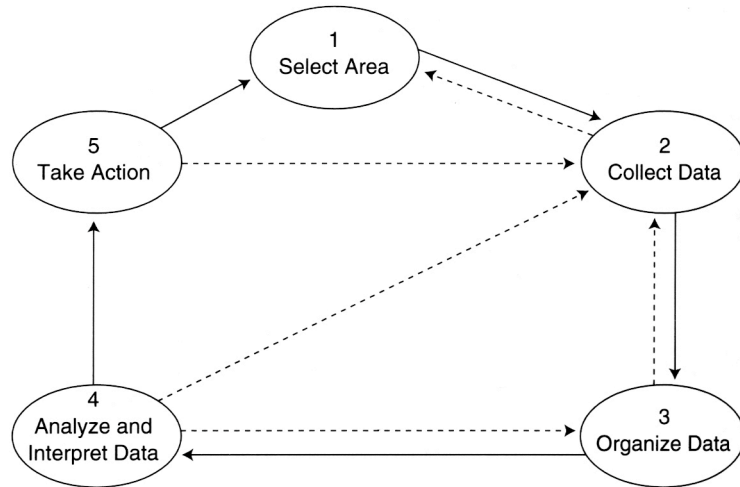


*Figure 3.4.* McNiff and Whitehead's Action-Reflection Cycle  
Source: (McNiff, J. & Whitehead, J., 2006)

Sagor (2005) described action research as a five stage process.

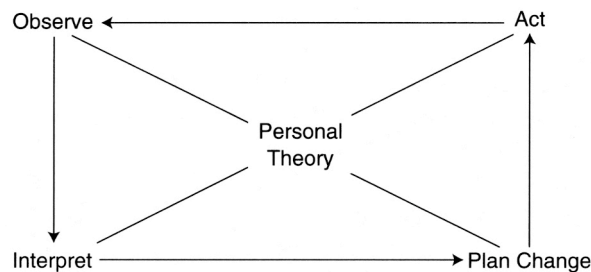
1. Clarifying vision and targets (what you want to accomplish);
2. Articulating theory (what approach has the greatest likelihood for success);
3. Implementing action and collecting data (what data will inform the effectiveness of the action);
4. Reflecting on data;
5. Planning informed action. (pp. 4,6)

Emily Calhoun's (1994) model has five steps: select an area of interest, collect data, organize data, analyze and interpret data, and take action, with interaction among the steps.



*Figure 3.5.* Calhoun's Action Research Cycle  
Source: (Calhoun, E.F., 1994)

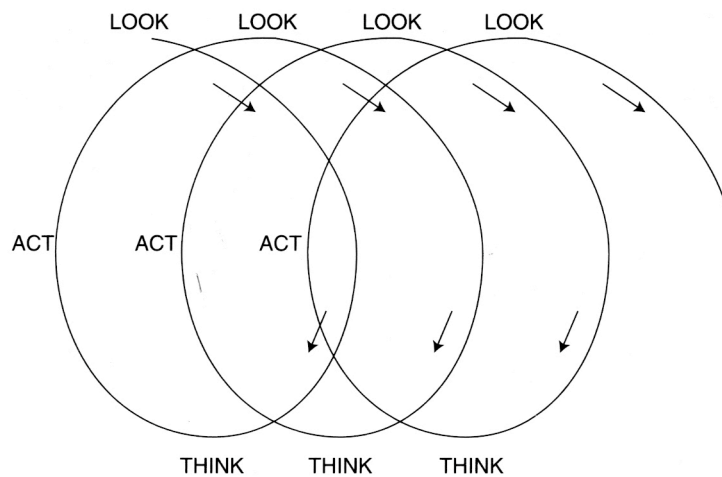
Wells (1994) employs an action research model with four steps including observing, interpreting, planning change, and acting. The research practitioner's personal theories are included as an element that is active and influential throughout the cycle.



*Figure 3.6.* Wells' Idealized Model of the Action Research Cycle  
Source: (Wells, G., 1994)

Stringer's (2007) action research cycle consists of seven steps grouped within three phases: look, think, and act. Stringer describes the cycle as an interacting spiral.

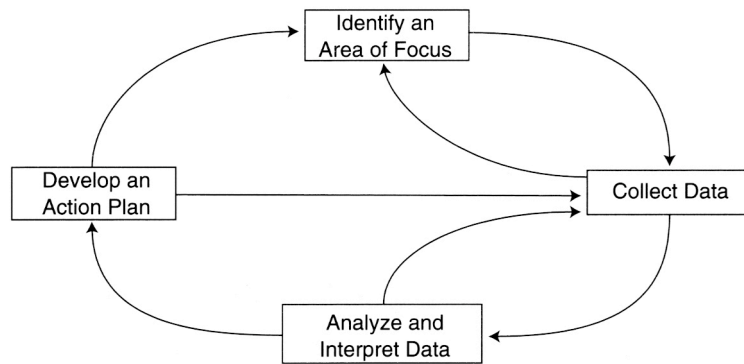
- Look: gather data, define and describe the situation
- Think: analyze, theorize
- Act: plan, implement, evaluate



*Figure 3.7.* Stringer's Action Research Interacting Spiral  
Source: (Stringer, E.T., 1996)

Mills (2000) suggests an action research process that incorporates the common elements of the other models. Identified as the Dialectic Action Research Spiral, it is designed to be dynamic and responsive, adaptable to different contexts and purposes. It is composed of the following four elements:

1. Identify an area of focus.
2. Collect data.
3. Analyze and interpret data.
4. Develop an action plan. (p. 6)



*Figure 3.8.* Mills Dialectic Action Research Spiral  
Source: (Mills, G.E., 2000)

## **ACTION PLAN**

Because the Mills (2000) Dialectic Action Research Spiral model for action research encompasses the common concepts of the other models, this study refers to the Mills model as a guide for implementing the action plan for the study. The Mills (2000) model is composed of the following four elements:

1. Identify an area of focus.
2. Collect data.
3. Analyze and interpret data.
4. Develop an action plan. (p. 6)

Even though the practical action research model describes distinct elements or phases, action research projects are emergent (Herr, K. & Anderson, G.L., 2005). They begin with an area of focus, but can be modified as the data gathering and analysis processes occur. This is part of the natural action research “spiraling synergism of action and understanding” (Herr, K. & Anderson, G.L., 2005, p. 70).

Lippitt et al. (1958) likewise suggest that practical action research does not typically progress sequentially through each phase of the process or cycle. More than one step may be active at the same time or new information or insights may promote readdressing certain steps of the study. The process also proceeds in a cyclic manner, re-starting as some aspects or issues of the problem are resolved and others are revealed.

Practical action research is conducted within the complicated psycho-sociological climate of on-going educational activities (Corey, S.M., 1953). This study of a distance learning program in a multi-campus community college district is no exception. Corey (1953) explains, “Because of the multiplicity of variables involved, the research is often lacking in precision. The results, however, have meaning for practice because they derive from an inquiry carried out in a real situation. (p. 143)

Because practical action research is cyclical and ongoing in nature, this study can document only a portion of the undertaking and interventions that occur because of the inquiry (Herr, K. & Anderson, G.L., 2005). Additional inquiries and interventions will likely occur in the college district after this particular research cycle is completed. This study documents the college district’s research thus far and organizes the discussion following the Mills model.

### **Identify Area of Focus**

The study focuses on the question: What administrative conditions and services should be established in a multi-campus community college district online distance-learning program to improve the college district’s ability to meet current and future distance learning student needs?

The study specifically focuses on the administrative aspects of a distance learning operation in a multi-college district. It does not explore the pedagogical considerations of online instructional delivery and methods, but rather the administrative and support

services that might better support the faculty and students within an online environment managed by a multi-college district.

### **Collect Data**

The study utilizes a task force of college district employees from various operational areas and locations to review and consider options for organizing and supporting the distance learning program. The following data were collected by the task force:

- Local observations and experiences with the LSCS distance learning program were reviewed.
- Meetings were conducted with practitioners at LSCS and other colleges around the United States who are involved with distance learning.

Following the above data collection activities, additional data were collected by the researcher:

- Prior and current distance learning documents were reviewed.
- A review of the related literature was used to correlate with local observations and findings from the meetings with other college distance learning practitioners.

### **Analyze and Interpret Data**

Data from the various sources were analyzed to search for trends, themes, commonalities, divergences, etc. within and among the various sources of data.

- The findings were interpreted through the filter of personal experience. As a part of the collaborative process, task force members shared personal insights related to the findings.

- Strengths and challenges of distance learning programs at other colleges were reviewed and compared, through analysis and interpretation of the information gained from the meetings conducted with other distance learning practitioners.
- Strengths and challenges of the LSCS distance learning program were articulated.
- The findings were compared and connected to the related research literature.
- Data were interpreted via a discussion of new questions or insights that emerged from the study. Possible implications from the study are reviewed in the final chapter of this treatise.

### **Develop an Action Plan**

An administrative proposal was prepared and submitted to the chancellor of the Lone Star College System for review and consideration. The proposal included recommendations for administrative conditions and services that should be established to support the distance learning program.

- Feedback on the proposal was requested from the distance learning practitioners at the other colleges who participated in the discussions.

### **SUMMARY**

This study seeks to answer the question: What administrative conditions and services should be established in a multi-campus community college district online distance-learning program to improve the college district's ability to meet current and future distance learning student needs?

The study is influenced by the relativist ontology and interpretivist epistemology. With consideration for ontology and epistemology, and given that this study is pursued within an actual community college organization for the purpose of exploring options for



improvement of its own distance learning program, the practical action research methodology is chosen to guide the study's action plan. This study does not explore the pedagogical considerations of online instructional delivery and methods, but rather the administrative and support services that might better support the faculty and students within an online environment managed by a multi-college district.

The study uses the five common goals of action research as a reference for validity: a) results that are relevant to the local setting, b) the achievement of action-oriented outcomes, c) a sound and appropriate research methodology, d) the education of both researcher and participants, and e) the generation of new knowledge (Herr, K. & Anderson, G.L., 2005, p. 54).

Practical action research requires research criteria that are uniquely suited and matched to the primary purposes of the research. Anderson et al. (Anderson, G.L. & Herr, K., 1999; Anderson, G.L., Herr, K., & Nihlen, A.S., 1994; Herr, K. & Anderson, G.L., 2005) provide criteria specifically suited for the goals, values, and processes of practical action research. The criteria consist of five concepts: dialogic validity, outcome validity, catalytic validity, democratic validity, and process validity.

After a review of various models for practical action research, the Mills (2000) Dialectic Action Research Spiral is chosen as the model to guide the study's action plan. Practical action research is emergent, subject to modification along the way, and therefore may not progress sequentially through each phase of the process or cycle. Nevertheless the study's action plan is framed by the four elements of the Mills model:

1. Identify an area of focus.
2. Collect data.
3. Analyze and interpret data.
4. Develop an action plan.

## **Chapter Four: Findings**

### **FRAMEWORK FOR FINDINGS**

The framework for the description of the findings in this practical action research study is based on the first two elements of the Mills (2000) Dialectic Action Research Spiral: identify an area (or areas) of focus, and collect data.

### **AREAS OF FOCUS IDENTIFIED**

The study focuses on the question: What administrative conditions and services should be established in a multi-campus community college district online distance-learning program to improve the college district's ability to meet current and future distance learning student needs?

The study specifically focuses on the administrative aspects of a distance learning operation in a multi-college district. It does not explore the pedagogical considerations of online instructional delivery and methods, but rather the administrative and support services that might better support the faculty and students within an online environment managed by a multi-college district.

The chancellor of the Lone Star College System established a task force to review and consider options for reorganizing and supporting a distance learning program in the multi-college system. The system-wide task force of faculty and staff from the five colleges and system office was appointed to review the college system's current distance learning operation, investigate national best practice, and make recommendations for an enhanced distance learning program that will maximize the potential for distance learning

across the college system to meet current and future student needs (Carstens, D.R., 2007a, 2008a).

The task force included the following representatives from various constituencies:

- three college presidents;
- three faculty members, two of which also serve as a department chair;
- one academic dean;
- the college system's top officer for curriculum and instruction;
- one campus coordinator for professional and faculty development;
- one educational services dean (this researcher) who served as the resource person for the task force.

During initial task force meetings, the members of the task force were invited to share local observations of, and experiences with, the LSCS distance learning program as operated over the last eight years. The task force then began the process of exploring insights from the observations and issues that emerged from task force discussions, identifying similarities and/or common themes. From this activity, six areas of focus emerged as the framework for reviewing and considering administrative conditions and services for the LSCS distance learning program.

The six areas of focus are:

- Governance and Planning;
- Technology Infrastructure;
- Support Services for Students;
- Curriculum and Design;
- Faculty Issues;
- Marketing and Branding.

## DATA COLLECTION

The study utilized a task force of college district employees from various operational areas and locations to review and consider options for organizing and supporting the LSCS distance learning program. The following data were collected from the task force activities:

- *LSCS Barriers.* Through a review of local observations and experiences with the LSCS distance learning program, data collection began with an initial identification of issues, challenges, or strengths in the LSCS distance learning program. The issues were analyzed and consolidated to create a list of “barriers” to full implementation of distance learning at LSCS.
- *Possible questions.* Based on the list of barriers, the task force formulated possible questions to be used when meeting with practitioners of other colleges around the United States who are involved with distance learning. The purpose of the questions was to guide the task force members toward new insights into the perceived barriers at LSCS as they speak with other practitioners.

Following the task force activities, additional data were collected by the researcher:

- *Prior LSCS distance learning documents.* Prior LSCS distance learning documents were reviewed for subsequent comparison with the findings of the task force and the literature.
- *Literature review.* A review of the related literature was used to correlate with the LSCS distance learning documents, local task force observations of the LSCS distance learning program, and findings from the task force meetings with other college distance learning practitioners.

The remainder of this chapter describes the data from the above-mentioned sources. This researcher has organized the data according to the six categories identified by the task force.

## **LSCS BARRIERS**

Through a review of local observations and experiences with the LSCS distance learning program, the task force assembled an initial list of issues, challenges, or strengths in the LSCS distance learning program. The issues were analyzed and consolidated to create a list of perceived barriers to full implementation of distance learning at LSCS.

### *Governance and Planning*

- Clarification of leadership and structure;
- Need to identify and build incentives for participation;
- Those who are accountable need to be empowered;
- Operational issues are frequent and recurring;
- A visionary leader of distance learning is needed to bring all the pieces together to create something new and cutting edge;
- Planning and operational processes need attention;
- Funding is a challenge.

### *Technology Infrastructure*

- Integration of IT, the web, the Center for Teaching and Distance Learning (CTDL), academic programming, and marketing is needed, with all focused on the development of distance learning as a unique method of course and program delivery;
- Need to resolve technology issues which impact student enrollments and faculty willingness to teach distance learning;

- Funding for technology needs attention.

#### *Support Services for Students*

- Need comprehensive support services for distance learning students that are equal to those of on-campus students, but tailored to the needs of distance learning students—operational, library, technical, early warnings, advising, etc.;
- Need to develop a full understanding of what current and potential distance learning students want and/or expect from distance learning.

#### *Curriculum and Design*

- Limited choices for online degrees and programs;
- Lack of a comprehensive plan for course development;
- Inconsistent instructional design process;
- No best practices implemented;
- Quality issues;
- No consistent standards for courses;
- No consistent interface for students;
- Evaluation process;
- Scheduling.

#### *Faculty Issues*

- Lack faculty support systems that make it easy to develop and deliver quality distance learning courses and programs;
- Limited general faculty support and training for distance learning;
- Lack sufficient numbers of qualified distance learning faculty;
- Need more tools for faculty to use (particularly workforce faculty) such as class capture, audio & video streaming, and online collaboration tools.

### *Marketing and Branding*

- Need a unified image and metaphor for the online campus experience. (adapted from Carstens, D.R., 2007a)

## **POSSIBLE QUESTIONS**

The task force used the list of barriers as a guide to formulate a list of possible questions to be used when meeting with other college distance learning practitioners around the United States. The purpose of the questions was to guide the task force members toward new insights into the perceived barriers at LSCS as they speak with other practitioners.

The task force identified ten community college distance learning programs around the country with the intent of contacting associated personnel from those colleges to discuss and compare observations concerning their distance learning programs. The above six areas of focus were used to frame the following possible questions for discussion with other distance learning practitioners.

### *Governance and Planning*

- What do you see as the major advantages of your system of organization?
- What would you change if you could?
- What is the organizational structure of the virtual campus or distance learning program? Do you have an organizational chart?
- What level of leadership is charged with the success of distance learning?
- Who is involved with strategic planning and operational decisions? What is the governance model? Is the distance learning unit empowered to insure quality and success of the program?

- What is your funding allocation model for distance learning courses? Is it different from on-campus classes?
- How are distance learning staff and/or faculty organized to support distance learning—centralized, decentralized, or a hybrid of the two models?
- How do you plan ahead to properly meet enrollment demands?
- How do you determine faculty load?

#### *Technology Infrastructure*

- Is the distance learning unit responsible for the quality and accessibility of the technology used for distance learning courses?
- What actions have you taken to ensure the stability of your learning platform, and how successful have you been?
- How do you plan ahead to properly meet enrollment demands?

#### *Support Services for Students*

- Do you have support personnel and/or departments that are trained and employed specifically to serve distance learning students? (library, advising, registration, financial aid, service desk, tutoring, testing, etc.)
- How do you prepare students for distance learning classes, and how consistent is this process across your distance learning offerings?
- Do you provide pre-screening to assist student enrollment decisions? Do you limit enrollments based on certain student criteria?
- What have you done to promote a common user experience for students in terms of registration, orientation, and course “look and feel?”
- What student services do you offer online?
- Are services provided 24 hours per day, 365 days per year? If so, which services? Do you provide these in-house or are you using vendors for tutoring, etc. and if so, what vendors are you using?



- Do you provide an online bookstore for easy purchase and delivery of books?

### *Curriculum and Design*

- Do you target courses, programs, certificates, and/or degrees for planned development?
- How are programs, certificates, degrees, and courses selected, planned, designed, and deployed?
- How do you handle instructional design? What is the role of faculty in the design process?
- Do you have design/development teams?
- How did you establish quality standards and benchmarks for course design?
- What is the percentage of each mode of delivery offered? Online, telecourse, paper correspondence?
- Is the content commercially produced or constructed by the college?
- Is there one design per course, or does each course have multiple designs?
- Does the design include modularization of content?

### *Faculty Issues*

- What are your distance learning enrollment numbers by course/discipline (online & hybrid/blended)?
- How are faculty identified, recruited, selected, and trained (including certifications and ongoing professional development), and evaluated (by peers)?
- How do you evaluate your distance learning courses and programs? Do you have a common web portal for all services of a virtual campus?

- How do you define student success for distance learning? Do you have student success data that can be shared? How do your distance learning courses compare to on-campus courses?
- When can students enroll?

### *Marketing and Branding*

- Do you have a marketing plan for distance learning that is tied to your overall strategic planning for distance learning degrees, certificates, etc.?
- Have you pursued creation of a branded identity for distance learning that fits within the overall district brand and identity?
- How does your marketing budget for distance learning compare to other marketing campaign budgets at your district? (adapted from Carstens, D.R., 2007a)

## **PRIOR LSCS DISTANCE LEARNING DOCUMENTS**

The Lone Star College System has been active in distance learning since 1990. Several district-wide committees have been organized to study distance learning and make recommendations for the program. Following the work of the current distance learning task force, this researcher reviewed the documents from prior committees for comparison with the findings of the task force and the literature.

The earlier LSCS documents discuss distance learning plans or recommendations from prior committees that developed their proposals in 1996, 1999, 2000, and 2001. Findings from those documents are listed below.

### **1995—1996 Recommendations of the District Distance Education Task Force**

From 1990 to 1995, the separate colleges of the North Harris Montgomery Community College District (NHMCCD, the former name of the Lone Star College System) individually developed and delivered distance learning classes. Enrollments

grew an average of 47.5% from 1990 to 1995. To manage growth and develop a planned approach to distance learning, a district-wide task force was charged in Fall 1995 by the Council for Education and Student Development (CESD) at NHMCCD to recommend a process for facilitating the transition from individualized college distance learning approaches toward a coordinated distance learning program featuring a minimum of duplicated effort and expenditures (Zizelmann, N., 1996). Members of the task force represented the four colleges and district office with faculty, administration and student services participation. Findings from the document include:

*Governance and Planning*

- It is important that the NHMCCD Board, administration and faculty are committed to adequately supporting development and delivery of quality instruction via distance learning;
- NHMCCD should be committed to efficient coordination of distance learning efforts while assuring the highest instructional quality possible;
- An optimal approach is needed for serving distance learning students that assures maximum district-wide access, support, and quality;
- A plan is needed that would provide access through distance learning to the Associate of Arts degree within three years;
- By Fall 1998 students can earn the Associate of Arts degree via distance learning from any of the four NHMCCD colleges;
- Students will ideally have access to courses offered via more than one mode of distance delivery, e.g. telecourse and modem;
- To offer an Associate of Arts degree via distance learning within three years, and to assure maximum access, support and quality, a distance education team is recommended to coordinate the program;

- The distance learning team should be composed of a distance learning advisory committee, distance learning staff, and college participants;
- The basic organizational structure consisting of a distance learning director, support staff, the advisory committee, and faculty training teams should be active by Fall 1996;
- The distance learning staff should be composed of a director, one instructional designer, one technical specialist, and one clerical support person;
- The distance learning advisory committee should be co-chaired by the district distance learning director and a faculty member, with other members including faculty from all colleges, technical specialists, learning resource center representatives, student service representatives, counselors, professional staff, and students;
- The distance learning advisory committee should make recommendations to the CESD relating to: a) establishment of long- and short-term goals, b) evaluation of district pilot projects, c) coordination of the distance learning program with other college initiatives, d) development of a marketing plan, e) evaluation and selection of new technology, f) standards for development and delivery of distance learning courses;
- The distance learning staff should coordinate with the advisory committee to develop, implement and evaluate a three-year visionary plan for distance learning delivery;
- Colleges should coordinate activities to decrease duplication of resources;
- In conjunction with district staff, colleges should coordinate scheduling of classes and faculty;
- The college associate deans, in conjunction with district staff, will coordinate scheduling of courses to assure maximum access opportunities for students;
- Every distance learning class should be listed in the separate printed schedule for each college, with the college selected by the student receiving credit and allocation funding for the student

enrollment and reimbursing the home institution of the instructor (if applicable).

#### *Technology Infrastructure*

- Technology such as voice, video, and computer conferencing supporting access, content delivery, and communication will be fully implemented and improved within two years;
- The distance learning staff should negotiate with potential infrastructure vendors to expand delivery options, e.g. cable companies.

#### *Support Services for Students*

- Services should be available within three years so students can accomplish all requirements of a distance learning course without physically coming to a college campus, e.g. testing, orientation, securing textbooks and materials, advising, etc.;
- The distance learning staff should coordinate technical support for students;
- The distance learning staff should prepare and update student handbooks;
- The distance learning staff should coordinate duplication and distribution of course required media as requested;
- Colleges should provide direct instructional support to students;
- Colleges should advise and track students that enroll in the Associate of Arts degree via distance learning;
- Colleges should coordinate activities with the bookstore for textbook and material distribution;
- Colleges should distribute appropriate textbook, media and instructional material;
- Colleges should conduct orientation for distance learning students;
- Support should be provided to students to assure that the technology used to deliver the courses works properly and that they have the resources needed to use it appropriately.

### *Curriculum and Design*

- There are broad-based changes in instructional delivery methods across the nation and NHMCCD colleges should be positioned to participate in these changes;
- The strength of NHMCCD lies in the quality of its instruction;
- The distance learning staff should encourage and support development of new courses offered via distance learning;
- Colleges should support the development of new courses that meet specific college needs;
- The distance learning staff should support the use of new technology;
- At least one new innovative technological approach should be tested each year to determine if it will meet the needs of NHMCCD students;
- The distance learning staff should coordinate duplication and distribution of course required media as requested;
- The distance learning staff should negotiate potential delivery mediums to expand delivery options e.g. cable companies;
- Standards and criteria should be created to guide the development, delivery and evaluation of distance learning courses;
- The advisory committee comprised of representatives from each college should formulate criteria and standards for the development, delivery and evaluation of distance learning courses;
- The criteria may include such factors as courses needed to complete the Associate of Arts degree, delivery modes currently offered for the proposed course, ability of the students to complete the learning outcomes, etc.;
- Development of courses to be offered via distance learning should be facilitated and supported by an instructional team composed of district and college support personnel;

- It is believed that a team approach to course development is necessary to combine content expertise, technical knowledge, and instructional support;
- Course development should be aided by an instructional designer who can assist in translating the faculty's ideas into an effective presentation;
- As courses are developed, instructional development teams will review the content to assure that learning outcomes comparable to on-campus courses are addressed;
- The learning outcomes for courses offered via distance learning must be comparable to those of courses offered at the colleges;
- Ideally all courses included in the distance learning plan will be available to distance learning students through at least two modes of delivery;
- The first priority will be to get all courses required for an Associate of Arts degree available through one mode of delivery;
- The instruction, course, and the distance learning program should be evaluated;
- Student performance and satisfaction indicators should be utilized to determine comparability between distance learning courses and courses taught on campus;
- The retention rates for distance learning courses should equal or exceed the retention rates for traditionally delivered courses in two years;
- At least 75 percent of distance learning students should rate the distance learning courses as satisfactory or higher by the Fall 1998 semester;
- Instructors delivering courses via distance learning will be evaluated by students and by associate deans;
- The distance learning director will have access to information regarding student satisfaction and success for the purpose of improving the program.

### *Faculty Issues*

- The district should be committed to continuous improvement in its use of technology and professional development for faculty in order to provide innovative delivery modes to meet student needs;
- The distance learning staff should plan and provide professional development opportunities for faculty including use of innovative delivery systems that include instructional technology;
- Optimal approach(es) should be utilized to assure that faculty have access to the training and resources needed to effectively and appropriately use technology to deliver distance education;
- Required training staffing space or equipment should be identified;
- New distance learning faculty should be provided orientation and training as needed;
- A training program should be implemented in 1996–1997 that will involve at least 20 percent of the full-time faculty and adjunct faculty interested in teaching distance learning classes at each college each year;
- A team approach should be used to provide professional development for the faculty;
- The professional development team should provide orientation for faculty who are beginning to offer classes via distance learning and facilitate a forum to discuss methods that improve instruction, student retention, and success;
- Faculty who want to incorporate technology into instruction either in the traditional classroom or in the distance learning setting should have help with learning how to effectively use required equipment and software;
- Ideally, a centrally located space or center should be designated, equipped, and staffed to support distance learning delivery and professional development of faculty in the use of instructional technology;
- The distance learning center should contain new equipment that is being tested so that all employees would have access to it;



- The distance learning center should provide the opportunity for faculty to learn to use and practice new delivery methods such as interactive video;
- In addition to serving the professional development needs of faculty involved in distance learning delivery, it is anticipated that all faculty interested in utilizing new and innovative technology for enhancement of classroom instruction could access the resources of the Instructional Technology Center;
- In addition to providing training for NHMCCD faculty, it is highly probable that local school district faculty and other area community college faculty could be served by an instructional technology training facility, requiring additional staff should this need occur and should potential revenues justify;
- If feasible, professional development opportunities should be expanded to local school districts, area community college faculty, and others on a fee-for-service basis by 1997–1998;
- Support should be provided to faculty to assure that the technology used to deliver the courses works properly and that they have the resources needed to use it appropriately;
- The distance learning staff should serve as a major district resource regarding distance learning;
- The distance learning staff should coordinate technical support for faculty;
- The distance learning staff should support the use of new technology;
- The distance learning staff should prepare and update faculty handbooks;
- The distance learning staff should coordinate duplication and distribution of course required media as requested;
- Colleges should evaluate instruction;
- Colleges should evaluate student performance;
- There should be a plan developed for the selection, orientation, and remuneration of faculty involved in distance learning;

- The goal is to increase the number of faculty members teaching distance learning classes by 25 percent each year through 1998;
- To facilitate the selection of faculty, information sessions should be held on college campuses to describe distance learning opportunities, and interested faculty should be made aware of student requirements and needs that are unique to distance learning;
- Distance learning classes should be counted as part of the normal teaching load or overload if the enrollment meets the established minimum/maximum range for the course, or on a per student basis for enrollment exceeding the maximum or not meeting the minimum requirement;
- To qualify for load or overload, the maximum enrollment for a distance education class must be reached, or faculty remuneration will be on a pro rata basis;
- If enrollment exceeds the maximum amount, the faculty will receive load credit for the maximum number of students and an additional pro rata amount for the number of students exceeding the maximum amount;
- If distance learning enrollments are large enough to meet the class minimums, then additional sections may be created;
- If enrollment does not meet the minimum requirement, the instructor may choose to teach the class and receive remuneration on a per student basis, which would not count as part of the instructor's load;
- Alternatively, a low enrollment class may be combined with a similar offering in the district to achieve the required enrollment;
- This distance learning plan could be used to pay for teaching classes with flexible entry and exits.

#### *Marketing and Branding*

- It is important that the NHMCCD Board, administration and faculty are committed to adequately supporting marketing of distance learning;

- The distance learning staff should develop and implement a marketing plan in conjunction with the advisory committee. (adapted from Zizelmann, N., 1996)

The recommendations from the 1996 documented resulted in the eventual establishment of funding for the Center for Technology and Distance Learning (CTDL), with a director and an instructional designer installed to provide support and training.

### **1999 Proposed Distance Education Program**

The 1999 distance learning document defines distance learning as “the acquisition of knowledge and skills which does not necessarily require physical access to a campus location for instruction or services” (Stegall, L., 1999, p. 1).

Working within the scope of the mission of the college district, the goals of the 1999 distance learning program proposal were:

- Provide the services and courses required to meet the needs of distance learning students;
- Better respond to needs of working adults by providing flexible options for accomplishing their educational goals;
- Foster workforce and economic development;
- Enhance the reputation of NHMCCD as leaders of collaborative instructional technology and innovation;
- Utilize the experience and expertise of faculty to develop and deliver quality distance learning opportunities to students. (adapted from Stegall, L., 1999)

The 1999 distance learning proposal articulated the following expected outcomes for the college district as a result of implementing the recommendations in the document:

- Barriers of location and fixed scheduling will be removed for students facing multiple challenges in trying to meet their education goals;

- Quality programs and courses will be made available to students throughout the region, the state, and to NHMCCD global partners;
- Collaborative models for delivery of distance learning will be developed;
- Partnerships with secondary schools, government agencies, libraries, and business and community clients will be developed and expanded;
- Instruction will be delivered using a variety of delivery methods, serving needs in the areas of instruction, training, and conferencing;
- Quality training opportunities for distance learning faculty and staff will be provided. (adapted from Stegall, L., 1999)

The 1999 proposal for the NHMCCD distance learning program included the following recommendations:

#### *Governance and Planning*

- Effective Fall 2000 the distance learning program should be a coordinated effort by all colleges of the district, with oversight provided by the NHMCCD via Distance Council, and should be named 'NHMCCD via Distance';
- A NHMCCD via Distance Council should be appointed by the Executive Council (EC) to provide oversight and direction to the distance learning program;
- The NHMCCD via Distance Council should be composed of faculty, associate deans, college distance learning coordinators, vice presidents of educational programs and resources, and chaired by a district director of distance learning.
- The Council should recommend to the academic vice presidents, through CESD, a distance learning plan including academic planning, scheduling, marketing and evaluation;
- The distance learning academic plan and schedule should be developed based on student needs and demand;

- The academic vice presidents and the district director of distance learning, who reports to the Vice Chancellor for Education and Student Development, should be accountable for implementation of plans and processes recommended by the NHMCCD via Distance Council and approved by CESD;
- Previous enrollment patterns and distance learning student demographics should be analyzed to determine demand for courses delivered via distance;
- Based on data concerning previous enrollment patterns and distance learning student demographics, the distance learning plan recommended to CESD by the NHMCCD via Distance Council should include a comprehensive, student-driven range of courses available for distance learning students;
- Courses in the 'NHMCCD via Distance' class schedule will be those included in the NHMCCD via Distance Council's distance learning plan, and will be taught by faculty who have submitted approved proposals;
- Effective Spring 2000, the 'NHMCCD via Distance' portion of the published class schedule should include only one class section per course per delivery mode;
- Class section numbers in the printed schedule will be provided so students can identify the college at which they wish to enroll;
- Students should be permitted to enroll at their college of choice (via telephone, in person, or web) and that college will receive credit for contact hours generated and tuition paid by the student;
- It is anticipated that full implementation of this plan can occur in academic year 2000-2001;
- Distance learning courses offered through this coordinated effort will be published in the district schedule under the 'NHMCCD via Distance' heading.
- Courses not meeting the criteria required by this distance learning plan will not be listed in the 'NHMCCD via Distance' portion of the class schedule nor receive other benefits of being a part of the distance learning program (they may be listed under the 'Flexible

Schedule' section of the class schedule if they meet the criteria for flex courses);

- Distance learning courses offered through this coordinated effort will be taught by faculty who have submitted a proposal to teach a 'NHMCCD via Distance' course, have met established criteria, and have been approved by their academic vice president;
- Distance learning courses offered through this coordinated effort will receive technology and financial incentives, such as marketing of the course via a district web site and through the state-wide Virtual College of Texas (VCT), a technology help desk for students, a district server with required software, payment of applicable license fees, stipends for course development, etc.
- Until enrollment numbers and costs can be analyzed at the end of FY2001, it will be difficult to develop a financial model that can equitably distribute costs in accordance with revenue;
- With experience and data, an equitable financial model can be built, but for the interim the following is proposed:
  - FY2000 and FY2001 – Include costs associated with implementation of this plan in the district operating budget instead of the technology fund;
  - FY2002 – Based on results of data analysis, college enrollment trends, and costs associated with delivery of services, budget would be based on an allocation model where a proportion of contact hour reimbursement would be used to offset costs of district supported services;
  - FY2003 – Adopt a revised allocation-based budget based on additional experience and data.

#### *Technology Infrastructure*

- Distance learning courses offered through this coordinated effort will be supported by a district server with required software (and appropriate licenses);
- Distance learning courses offered through this coordinated effort will receive tape duplication services (if needed);

- Distance learning courses offered through this coordinated effort will have all licensure and enrollment fees paid by the Center for Technology and Distance Learning (this applies primarily to video and telecourses).

#### *Support Services for Students*

- It will be impossible to accomplish all of the goals outlined in this plan in a short period of time; however, in order for NHMCCD to be competitively positioned to deliver high quality distance learning courses and services, it is imperative that a reasonably aggressive timetable be proposed;
- Effective Fall 1999 NHMCCD should begin its transition to provide services to distance learning students at all NHMCCD colleges regardless of where the student is enrolled or the faculty member is located, with provision of services fully implemented by Spring 2000;
- Because many NHMCCD students will continue to want to access services at the NHMCCD colleges, it is expected that by Spring 2000, services will be available for 'NHMCCD via Distance' students at all NHMCCD colleges regardless of where the faculty member is located or where the student is enrolled;
- The ultimate goal of this plan is to deliver by Fall 2000 distance education courses and services to students in ways that do not require their physical presence on our college campuses, including provision of testing, orientation, counseling, advising, registration, and library services via distance delivery modes;
- Distance learning courses offered through this coordinated effort will meet criteria approved by the CESD which will include provision of services to students at sites other than NHMCCD colleges by Fall 2000;
- By Fall 2000 services and instruction will be available to distance learning students who do not desire to physically access them at a NHMCCD college location;
- The printed class schedule should indicate that services for distance learning students can be accessed at any of the NHMCCD colleges (or at other remote sites) regardless of where the student enrolled;

- Distance learning courses offered through this coordinated effort will receive technology support through a help desk hot line provided for students.

### *Curriculum and Design*

- Based on the distance learning program plan approved by CESD, proposals should be sought from faculty to develop courses that are currently not being offered via distance;
- The NHMCCD via Distance Council should recommend criteria, timelines, and expectations for the proposal process to CESD;
- Distance learning courses offered through this coordinated effort will receive financial support through payments to faculty for course development costs;
- Funds for course development should be included in the district distance learning budget;
- The NHMCCD via Distance Council will recommend to CESD a set of standards of practice and evaluation for distance learning courses;
- The syllabus and orientation materials of each distance learning course will be expected to address the agreed upon standards by the Spring 2000 semester;
- The assurance of quality distance learning instruction rests with college associate deans and academic vice presidents of the colleges.

### *Faculty Issues*

- Previous enrollment patterns and distance learning student demographics should be analyzed to determine demand for courses delivered via distance (rather than faculty preference);
- Based on a distance learning plan for delivery of student-driven courses, the academic vice presidents should solicit proposals from faculty to teach specific distance courses via identified delivery modes;
- The NHMCCD via Distance Council will recommend criteria for faculty selection and vice president approval to CESD;



- Criteria for faculty selection to teach distance learning courses may include factors such as:
  - Associate dean approval;
  - Completion of training or required skills level to the satisfaction of the associate dean;
  - Agreement to make services available to students at locations other than the faculty's college campus, e.g., testing, orientation, homework pick-up, etc.;
  - Agreement to meet other standards as established by the NHMCCD via Distance Council;
  - Expertise and/or previous experience serving distance learning students effectively;
- Academic vice presidents should submit approved faculty proposals to the district director of distance learning who will develop the schedule of 'NHMCCD via Distance' offerings and teaching assignments based on the approved distance learning plan;
- The NHMCCD via Distance Council should seek district-wide faculty input for a plan to equitably allocate student enrollments to faculty who have submitted approved proposals, then recommend the student allocation plan to CESD;
- The student assignment plan and timeline should assure that faculty chairs and associate deans will know which faculty member(s) are assigned to courses and students when the schedule is published;
- The student assignment plan, as approved by CESD, should be piloted for one year;
- At the end of one year, the student assignment plan should be reviewed to determine if there is equity among colleges in regard to enrollments and costs, with modifications made to the plan as needed.

### *Marketing and Branding*

- The NHMCCD via Distance Council, in conjunction with the Public Information Council, should recommend a distance learning marketing plan;
- The marketing plan should be based on research that matches target markets with appropriate marketing approaches and strategies (by Spring 2000);
- A district distance learning web page, maintained by the district director of distance learning, will be online listing all 'NHMCCD via Distance' courses by Fall 2000;
- As a minimum, the distance learning web page will by Fall 2000 include the distance learning course offerings each semester, linked to faculty homepages where students can get specific course information;
- Distance learning courses offered through this coordinated effort will receive marketing support via a listing on the district distance learning web site maintained by the district director of distance learning;
- Distance learning courses offered through this coordinated effort will be eligible for additional marketing support via a state-wide listing with the Virtual College of Texas (courses not meeting the criteria of the 'NHMCCD via Distance' program will not be submitted to VCT). (adapted from Stegall, L., 1999)

The 1999 document became the basis for a second administrative step toward implementing a shared and coordinated distance learning program at NHMCCD. Funds were provided via operational and grant sources to augment the services of the Center for Technology and Distance Learning (CTDL), adding a district director of distance learning to provide leadership and develop coordinated services and processes.

### **2000 Distance Learning Program**

The district director of distance learning was hired in the summer of 1999 and worked with a distance learning council, associate deans, and faculty at all college

locations to develop a distance learning program proposal. The purpose of the *2000 Distance Learning Program* document was to “establish a pilot program for a coordinated set of processes and services to support instructional technology and distance learning throughout the district” (Carstens, D.R., 2000). The operational plan was presented to and approved by the NHMCCD Executive Council in April 2000.

The 2000 distance learning program document sought to organize NHMCCD distance learning efforts to:

- Provide the services and courses required to meet the needs of distance learning students;
- Better respond to the needs and educational goals of working adults;
- Foster workforce and economic development;
- Enhance the reputation of NHMCCD as a leader of collaborative instructional technology and innovation;
- Utilize the experience and expertise of faculty to develop and deliver quality distance learning opportunities to students;
- Foster a spirit of cooperation and collaboration among the NHMCCD colleges. (adapted from Carstens, D.R., 2000)

The 2000 distance learning program document expresses the following expected outcomes for the college district as a result of implementing the plan:

- Barriers of location and fixed scheduling will be removed for students facing multiple challenges in trying to meet their education goals;
- Quality programs and courses will be made available to students throughout the region, the state, and to NHMCCD global partners;
- Collaborative models will be created for the development and delivery of distance learning courses and programs;

- Partnerships with secondary schools, government agencies, libraries, and business and community clients;
- Instruction using a variety of delivery methods;
- Quality training opportunities for distance learning faculty and staff. (adapted from Carstens, D.R., 2000)

Recommendations from the 2000 document include the following:

*Governance and Planning*

- The coordination and planning of distance learning at NHMCCD is a partnership between the colleges and the Center for Technology and Distance Learning (CTDL);
- The CTDL will provide a service to the colleges in the form of coordination and faculty and student support services as outlined in the plan;
- The colleges will determine the ultimate direction of the distance learning program;
- The NHMCCD Distance Learning Council (DLC) will oversee the distance learning program;
- The DLC will be responsible for a comprehensive review of distance learning instruction and support services each year; with an annual report submitted to the NHMCCD executive vice chancellor for review by the Executive Council;
- The DLC membership includes: the district director of distance learning (chair); the chief academic officer from each college; the chief student services officer from each college; the chair of the instructional council; and the chair of the community education council, with other members added at the direction of the district Executive Council;
- A faculty advisory committee composed of two faculty appointed from each college will advise the CTDL in planning and operations, and will participate in the evaluation of the distance learning program;
- The faculty advisory committee members will serve staggered two year terms to insure continuity and consistency;

- The DLC will develop and recommend for approval by CESD and EC an annual 'Distance Learning Plan' based on student needs and demands, and college interests and goals;
- Research will be conducted by the CTDL to support planning decisions regarding distance learning certificate and degree program development;
- The annual distance learning plan will include goals for instructional development, instructional support and services, course scheduling, training, marketing, and evaluation;
- The DLC will utilize existing college and district structures and practices, wherever possible, in developing the plan;
- The DLC will be responsible for the creation of any supplemental committees to support these activities;
- The DLC will work with the college distance learning committees and associate deans to ensure that the distance learning programs and services meet the needs of students;
- Distance learning program responsibilities include, but are not limited to, the following: course scheduling, schedule listing, financial plan and model, faculty selection, evaluation, course development;
- College distance learning committees will provide feedback to the CTDL on logistical issues relating to support, training, research, course development, innovation, and certification;
- The district distance learning staff and college distance learning coordinators will provide ongoing logistic coordination for distance learning activities and services;
- Support services for distance learning students will be provided through a coordinated effort among the colleges and the CTDL;
- The DLC will ensure that each of the support services for students are monitored and evaluated on a regular basis;
- The distance learning schedule will be compiled for one full academic year in October of each year;

- The colleges will make scheduling recommendations through their respective chief academic officers to the DLC for proposed annual distance learning course offerings, with the DLC making recommendations to CESD for the final schedule;
- Only courses approved by the Distance Learning Council for distance delivery will be included in the NHMCCD and VCT course schedules beginning with the Spring 2001 schedule;
- Only courses that do not require visits to the college will be included in the distance learning course schedules;
- The CTDL will develop the distance learning section of the printed and web based course schedules;
- The CTDL will work collaboratively with each college to verify the courses and information to be included in the printed distance learning schedules;
- Distance learning class sections will be listed in the printed schedule and on the web site by college, subject or program, and individual faculty;
- The DLC will be responsible for consistency, coordination, and cooperation among the colleges in distance learning scheduling decisions, with CESD arbitrating unresolved disagreements;
- Reimbursements for student contact hours and tuition in distance learning courses will be calculated the same as other courses.

#### *Technology Infrastructure*

- The CTDL will provide operational and technical support for shared technologies used by distance learning courses and programs;
- Technologies such as a web-based course server (i.e. WebCT), testing server, video or audio production or duplication, or other shared systems will be part of the CTDL;
- The CTDL will provide staffing to develop and maintain technologies used for the delivery of instructional services such as course development and ongoing distance learning courses.

### *Support Services for Students*

- A common set of services will be available for distance learning students at all NHMCCD colleges;
- The CTDL will provide operational and technical support for the shared services used by distance learning courses and programs;
- Effective Summer 2000, NHMCCD will begin its transition to provide services to distance learning students at all colleges, with the anticipated full implementation of services by Spring 2001;
- The ultimate goal of this distance learning plan is to deliver distance learning courses and services to students in ways that do not require their physical presence on the college campuses;
- Services will be developed each semester until a complete range of services is available via distance delivery;
- Intended services include provision of testing, orientation, counseling, advising, registration, and library services via distance delivery modes;
- Testing will be available at all colleges and coordinated with campus assessment centers, and will be offered online or on-site;
- Additional off-campus testing facilities will be arranged as needed;
- A common and secure distance learning courier process for students will be available for support of correspondence between distance learning faculty and students;
- Information and registration services will be provided to distance learning students using various distance learning formats (telephone, fax on demand (FOD), e-mail, chat, etc.) to support academic advising, registration, general information, and tutoring;
- Orientation materials will be developed for delivery to students via distance learning technologies;
- Tutors will be accessible to students via telephone or Internet;
- Distance learning students who contact the CTDL seeking student development services will be referred to a college;

- Student development seminars and other helpful student development programs will be offered via distance learning methods;
- The CTDL will provide help desk support via voice, web, and fax;
- Telephone help desk support will operate weekday evenings and selected hours on the weekend;
- Technology-based help desk support will run online continuously, and will include a frequently asked questions (FAQ) section, training materials, orientation materials, software guides, and sample course environments;
- Distance learning students will receive library services from designated distance learning librarian(s);
- Library services may be requested via FAX, phone, or web;
- Library online databases will be accessible from off-campus locations;
- A process for interlibrary loan and book requests will be accessible from off-campus locations;
- A comprehensive 'Online Campus' or 'eCampus' will be implemented to provide a coordinated and consistent web presence for distance learning students;
- The online campus web site will provide access to, and information about, services offered via telephone, online or onsite;
- The online campus web site will maintain a list of approved distance learning courses, with links to faculty and course home pages;
- The CTDL will study the effectiveness of distance learning support services through student questionnaires or other instruments.

### *Curriculum and Design*

- The CTDL will provide operational and technical support for course development and the shared services used by resulting distance learning courses and programs;



- As part of the annual distance learning plan, each Fall the NHMCCD Distance Learning Council will solicit input for proposed new distance learning programs or course development and/or revisions;
- A plan for annual program and course development will be recommended each year by the DLC to the executive vice chancellor no later than February each year;
- Faculty assignments for course development are the responsibility of the college and will be included in faculty workload agreements;
- The district director of distance learning will manage the budget to support the costs of course development;
- Instructional development staff at the CTDL will provide assistance to faculty engaged in developing approved distance learning courses;
- The CTDL will provide staff support in general for the design and development of courses and learning environments;
- The CTDL will provide research services, analyzing the effectiveness of distance learning course design, delivery, and support;
- The CTDL will also research new methods and technologies for course development and distance learning;
- Each distance learning course will be developed within a consistent environmental design or framework, but the content and methods chosen for use in each individual section may be unique to that section;
- The ‘product’ of the instructional development process will be a set of core course materials that make up the elements of course content and methodology as determined by the course designer(s);
- The core course materials will be replicated for all sections of a distance learning course, for use by faculty assigned to teach each section(s);
- Depending on the technology, the core materials may be printed documents, web pages, web sites, chat rooms, etc.;

- Those content areas of specialty or emphasis, and the methods or practices that did not receive consensus for inclusion in the core materials and design of the course, will be made available to any individual faculty member who chooses to use them in their own distance learning section(s);
- The result of the course design and development process is that every section of an approved NHMCCD distance learning course will share a consistent core of content, methods, and activities, but faculty will retain the flexibility to modify the course to fit the areas of specialty, interest, or skills of the instructor;
- The common core of a distance learning course will be defined, as will the discrepancies among sections, so that applied research processes can assist the colleges in understanding and sharing successful teaching and learning models;
- All NHMCCD distance learning courses will have a course syllabus format with clearly identified learning outcomes;
- The course syllabus format will include space wherein faculty may include information unique to the course section;
- The course syllabus will be available online and printable from the online location;
- The DLC will have final approval for each section syllabus to ensure clarity and consistency;
- Each distance learning course taught will be evaluated based on standards established by the DLC;
- Course evaluations will include the effectiveness of the instructor, the course, the support services, the modality, and the suitability of the course for distance learning.

#### *Faculty Issues*

- Selection of faculty for distance learning courses will be the responsibility of the colleges based on criteria approved by the DLC;
- Faculty will be required to comply with the standards for the distance learning program established by the DLC;

- It is expected that the following criteria be considered for faculty selection to teach distance learning courses:
  - Associate dean evaluation of prior distance learning instruction;
  - Demonstration of distance learning certification, or required skills level, as determined by the college;
  - Student surveys of prior distance learning courses;
  - Student surveys of on-campus courses;
  - Participation in developing a course;
  - Past experience in distance learning, technology integration, or distributed learning methods;
- The CTDL, DLC, and CESD will work with the associate deans to develop guidelines for evaluations;
- The overall evaluation of each instructor and course will be a factor in continued faculty participation in the distance learning program;
- Associate deans are responsible for evaluation of distance learning faculty under their supervision;
- A common set of services will be available for distance learning faculty at all NHMCCD colleges;
- The DLC will ensure that each of the support services for faculty are monitored and evaluated on a regular basis;
- The CTDL will provide staff support for the design and development of courses and learning environments;
- The CTDL will also offer course validation instruments to distance learning faculty who wish to study course design;
- The course validation service will be offered to help analyze various aspects of distance learning environments and courses;
- The results of the course research will be shared initially among the participating teaching faculty of the course, while summary

data of the results will be shared with EC as part of the annual distance learning report;

- The CTDL will assist faculty in developing orientation materials for delivery via distance learning;
- Testing will be available at all colleges and coordinated with campus assessment centers, and will be offered online or on-site;
- Additional off-campus testing facilities will be arranged as needed;
- A common and secure distance learning courier process for students will be available for support of correspondence between distance learning faculty and students;
- The CTDL will provide help desk support via voice, web, and fax;
- Help desk telephone support will operate weekday evenings and selected hours on the weekend;
- Technology-based help desk support such as the web site and fax will be developed and will run online continuously;
- Online help desk information will include a frequently asked questions (FAQ) section, training materials, orientation materials, software guides, and sample course environments;
- To promote and encourage training, distance learning certification, and the development of a professionally trained faculty, the CTDL will work with the college distance learning committees to support programs such as the Catalyst Project, technology fellows, technology think tank, summer institute, distance learning certification, or general faculty training resources;
- The Catalyst Project will be a coordinated initiative to create a web site for the purpose of sharing faculty development efforts and materials among the various campuses;
- Participants of the Catalyst Project include a team of staff members from the district and campuses who support college distance learning and general training needs;
- The Technology Fellows program will provide funding for faculty to assist their peers in the integration of technology in teaching and learning;

- The Technology Think Tank will consist of a CTDL-sponsored one-day think tank, twice a year, to share and publish best practices for distance learning environments, and to foster exploration into new ideas or approaches to distance learning and instructional technology;
- The Summer Institute will be conducted by the CTDL to foster strong relationships between college and high school faculty;
- The summer institutes will focus on training needs that are common to the colleges and school districts, from technology skills to integration strategies, with the first institute focusing on collaborative learning in support of the Technology Infrastructure Fund (TIF) grant;
- Distance Learning Certification will be a professional certificate developed as an option for college and high school faculty;
- The distance learning certificate will be offered through college community education departments, and the CTDL and colleges will support training activities;
- The Distance Learning Council (DLC) will determine the requirements and criteria for the distance learning certification process;
- The distance learning certification requirements will be described in terms of demonstrable skills or knowledge, and will not be based upon attendance at required training sessions or activities;
- The distance learning certification requirements will also be specialized according to the particular distance learning environment;
- Faculty seeking training for distance learning will be provided general faculty development assistance from college distance learning committees and the CTDL;
- Various professional development modules of information or activities appropriate for the chosen distance learning environment (Internet, video, etc.) will be developed;

- Training modules will be available online and training activities will be delivered online and/or onsite to assist faculty in attaining distance learning skills, but participation is voluntary;
- Teachers involved in distance learning training will be invited to serve as mentor instructors for faculty in designated distance learning courses;
- Records of professional development activities will be maintained for research and accreditation requirements to document the training activities and certification level of distance learning faculty, and to assist in studying the validity or effectiveness of the skills and training.

#### *Marketing and Branding*

- The district director of distance learning and instructional technology will work with the district public relations department in implementing marketing efforts for established distance learning programs;
- Research regarding possible programs to offer via distance, market demographics, etc. will be conducted by the district distance learning department, or solicited from the district public relations department. (adapted from Carstens, D.R., 2000)

The *2000 Distance Learning Program* for planning and operations was approved by the NHMCCD executive council and became the basis for expanded funding of the distance learning program in FY2001, providing additional staff at the CTDL to support faculty and students involved the distance learning program. Additional positions included the technology specialist; coordinator of professional development, support, and research; course web developer; and coordinator of course development.

#### **Distance Learning Report, Fall 2001**

Under the *2000 Distance Learning Program* guidelines approved by the executive council, the coordinated distance learning program received additional staffing and was launched as the eCampus. Following a full year of operation of the eCampus a review of

the program was conducted in Fall 2001. The review involved a meeting with college service area representatives and leadership. The agenda included a discussion of the past year's progress, explained the current status of the program, and highlighted several opportunities for further development. As a follow-up to the program review meeting, a distance learning report document was produced to summarize several recommendations for the future development of distance learning at NHMCCD. As such, the report was not a new proposal to replace the current operational plan for distance learning, but focused on enhancements or additions to the program established by 2000 document.

The Fall 2001 distance learning report document expressed the following vision and intended outcomes to be realized by 2003 as a result of implementing recommendations:

- The North Harris Montgomery Community College District will be operating one of the premier distance learning programs in the state and nation, providing quality services to faculty and students;
- Online courseware from NHMCCD is award winning and of high quality;
- Distance learning certified faculty are high quality, providing excellent online learning experiences;
- Distance learning students are appropriately advised and enrolled in their distance learning courses;
- Assistance is easily accessible to help enrolled students be successful in distance learning courses. (adapted from Carstens, D.R., 2001)

Below are findings from the document, in the form of observations and recommendations.

#### *Governance and Planning*

- Distance learning courses should be defined and coded in a way that is compatible with state reporting guidelines (50% or more of

a course delivered via distance should be reported to the state as a distance learning course);

- A method should be devised to delineate the differences among classes and accurately communicate expectations to students in the printed schedule;
- Alternate uses of printed schedules should be considered;
- Opportunities should be investigated for participation in appropriate state or Texas Association of Community Colleges committees related to or impacting distance learning;
- What is the best way to ensure that the learning environments are supported for the various types of courses that are predicted (onsite courses with web components, flex courses, and full distance learning courses)?

#### *Technology Infrastructure*

- A majority of college academic divisions have placed courses online at the eCampus for student use;
- The eCampus online courses are either traditional courses on campus with an additional web component, flex courses, or pure distance learning courses with no required campus visits;
- The future use of technology and distance learning resources in 'traditional' college courses is expected to increase to the point that their inclusion will become a norm for college learning;
- Roles should be defined for the CTDL/eCampus staff, district IT, and college IT areas as they relate to supporting distance learning technology resources and/or users;
- Current technology-related distance learning resources include:
  - email (Microsoft Exchange server, Campuscruiser, external providers);
  - learning management system (currently WebCT);
  - streaming media;
  - instructional television (ITV);



- online ‘faculty offices’;
- course web information sites;
- eCampus website;
- A potential organizational framework for technology support:
  - District IT: handles the local area network (LAN), wide area network (WAN), network switches, network wiring, etc., user IDs, and data from Colleague (the enterprise resource planning system);
  - IT help desk: login passwords for email;
  - College IT: desktop hardware, lab equipment support, college LAN;
  - eCampus/CTDL: learning management system (currently WebCT), faculty training, student tutorials, eCampus help desk.

#### *Support Services for Students*

- We have established phase I of the eCampus website, which includes access to a variety of services for students and faculty;
- The next phase of the eCampus website will include student services and library links;
- Pre-assessment instruments and advising guidelines should be developed;
- We should provide 800 number access to the distance learning help desk, and an answering ‘menu’ for the IT help desk and the distance learning help desk to route calls appropriately;
- Development of the eCampus help desk computer information system should be continued;
- Development of eCampus student services should be continued for use by colleges and individual students, including an online application, an online advising process, the incorporation of Montgomery College’s campus star information into the site, and pre-assessment tools;

- eCampus learning center services should be developed for use at colleges and by individual distance learning students, including tutoring services, developmental studies curriculum, writing lab, math lab, reading lab, etc.;

### *Curriculum and Design*

- Procedures for the establishment, maintenance, and use of a virtual ‘store shelf’ of official eCampus courseware should be developed under the pending new intellectual property policy;
- Standards should be developed for eCampus courseware to be placed ‘on the shelf’ for faculty use and selection by associate deans;
- We should continue to review course development goals to establish more certificate and degree options via distance learning.

### *Faculty Issues*

- Distance learning training should be provided to associate deans;
- More sophisticated information tools should be developed for faculty and associate deans, allowing them to analyze instructional methods and associated success.

### *Marketing and Branding*

- A marketing campaign for distance learning options should be developed;
- A quality level should be established for eCampus courseware that will strengthen the NHMCCD ‘brand’ name among online options for students;
- We should determine the feasibility of establishing a co-op enterprise for the purpose of marketing and licensing the external use of eCampus courseware. (adapted from Carstens, D.R., 2001)

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature review is detailed in the second chapter of this study and will not be repeated here. The literature review examined three themes providing insights into administrative conditions and services needed for a community college distance learning program. First, principles and practices were reviewed from national organizations, state and regional organizations, and accrediting agencies. Second, quality criteria and benchmarks were reviewed from the Institute for Higher Education Policy and the Sloan Consortium. Benchmarks tend to appear in the literature more as descriptors of administrative conditions and services that should be present in an online distance learning program, while quality criteria were more likely to be addressed in the literature within the context of evaluating the administrative conditions and services of distance learning programs. Both benchmarks and criteria are useful in the exercise of considering what administrative conditions and services should be established for an online distance learning program in a multi-campus community college district. Additionally, several studies provided general recommendations, strategies, and success factors that are important to consider in establishing a distance learning program.

## **SUMMARY**

The framework for the description of the findings in this practical action research study is based on the first two elements of the Mills (2000) Dialectic Action Research Spiral: identify an area (or areas) of focus, and collect data.

The task force established by the chancellor of the Lone Star College System identified the areas of focus for the study. The task force began the process of exploring insights from local observations and issues that emerged from task force discussions, identifying similarities and/or common themes. From this activity, the six areas of focus

for this study emerged as the framework for reviewing and considering administrative conditions and services for the LSCS distance learning program.

The six areas of focus are:

- Governance and Planning;
- Technology Infrastructure;
- Support Services for Students;
- Curriculum and Design;
- Faculty Issues;
- Marketing and Branding.

Data collection from the task force activities included a review of: a) identified barriers to full implementation of the LSCS distance learning program, and b) possible questions to be used in meetings with distance learning practitioners from other colleges.

Subsequent data collection from the researcher included a review of prior LSCS distance learning documents and related literature.

## **Chapter Five: Analysis, Action Plan, Recommendations**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The framework for chapter five of this practical action research study includes the final two elements of the Mills (2000) Dialectic Action Research Spiral: analyze and interpret data, and develop an action plan.

Analysis and interpretation in this study evolved into two phases. One phase consists of task force activities devoted to analysis and interpretation. The other phase appears later in this chapter and consists of additional analysis and interpretation by the researcher.

The action plan element of the cycle also appears in two phases. The task force proposal represents the action plan as proposed by the task force. The institutional response to the proposal resulted in an institutional action plan.

### **ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION: PHASE I**

Analysis activities from the task force members include an introspective identification of foundational questions that framed their thinking, and a review of the meetings with benchmark distance learning practitioners to: a) identify strengths and challenges among the benchmark institutions, and b) identify and reaffirm strengths and challenges of the Lone Star College System distance learning program.

### **FOUNDATIONAL QUESTIONS INFLUENCING THE PROPOSAL**

The task force discussed several fundamental questions prior to preparing the distance learning administrative proposal. Many of the questions could not be answered

directly in the proposal, but nevertheless influenced the task force as formal recommendations were developed. A synopsis of the questions is listed below.

- Considering the history of growth in distance learning, what does it take to double our distance learning enrollment? What services must be present to accomplish this? How can the distance learning program be designed to be sustainable with such growth?
- How do we expand the number of courses, programs, certificates, or degrees offered online?
- What does it take to make our distance learning program among the best in the country? What defines this?
- How do we better serve distance learning students online?
- Can we move the program toward student-driven schedules?
- Can we design a student-driven distance learning model that includes an accessible, seamless, transparent support system for students?
- Technology has changed over the years. How does that impact the distance learning program?
- With the evolution of technologies in all forms of teaching and learning, it is difficult to separate distance learning from other teaching. Can distance learning technologies and services somehow serve only distance learning faculty and students? Or should we assume that funded services for distance learning will actually support any LSCS student or instructor?
- Most of our distance learning students are not ‘pure’ distance learning students. They enroll in on-campus courses as well as distance learning courses. Is this because we are not offering the courses that potential distance learning students

- need? Or are there two different markets for distance learning? Can we measure the number of graduates who are totally online?
- Which direction do we take the online learning environment? Do we continue to emphasize the cohort-based environments or do we shift distance learning toward totally flexible approaches that are most likely individualized? The two environments also represent two different markets of students. Can we serve both environments and market sectors?
  - Should the distance learning program be continuous enrollment, self-paced, and competency-based (assessment would be a major part of such an approach)?
  - What is the vision for the distance learning program? Do we plan to provide services for the armed forces? Do we plan to develop international programs? Or, is it best to first ensure that we serve our local market well with quality and consistency and then those other markets could develop later?
  - Would creating a sixth college devoted to distance learning enhance distance learning in this college district? Is an independent institution necessary? Or can we in fact maximize our ability to serve current and future distance learning students without creating a sixth college?
  - Should each of the five current colleges be assigned to focus on specific curricular areas in distance learning?

### **Review of the Meetings with Distance Learning Practitioners**

The task force contacted distance learning practitioners from other community colleges to compare observations concerning their distance learning programs. Ten community college distance learning programs were selected from various parts of the country: Arizona, Florida, Kansas, Nevada, Ohio, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia. The task force selected the benchmark distance learning institutions based on factors that

were meaningful for the task force, such as the similarity of the college in comparison with the Lone Star College System, the perceived size of the program, the reputation of the college or program, whether the program functioned within a multi-college district, or personal experience with and prior knowledge of practitioners at the institution.

Task force members interpreted the information received during meetings with practitioners from the selected distance learning programs through the filter of personal experience and learning. As a part of the collaborative process of the study, task force members attended several follow-up meetings during which they shared personal insights related to the discussions with practitioners from the benchmark distance learning programs. From these exploratory meetings, the following themes emerged concerning the distance learning programs at other colleges and at LSCS.

#### **STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES OF BENCHMARK DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAMS**

Discussions with other college representatives consisted of free flowing conversations arising from the questions (detailed in Chapter Four) posed by the LSCS task force members. Based upon the concerns or strengths mentioned by the practitioners from other colleges concerning their own distance learning programs, the task force members were free to choose and focus on various questions among the six areas of focus in order to further understand the feedback received from the distance learning practitioners at other colleges.

Following the meetings with other distance learning practitioners, the task force members were asked to reflect upon the information received from the conversations and compose a summary of their analysis and interpretation. Several insights emerged from the discussions with the benchmark institutions. The task force members observed aspects of distance learning programs that are potential strengths that LSCS leaders



should endeavor to incorporate into the LSCS distance learning model. These aspects present perceived strategic benefits to the distance learning program. There were also aspects of other distance learning programs that present challenges that should be addressed and minimized in the LSCS distance learning model.

### **Observed Strengths of Benchmark Distance Learning Programs**

#### *Governance and Planning*

- System-wide plan for course and program development to support scalability and quality;
- Comprehensive distance learning team including student services, IT, design specialists, etc.;
- Strong coordination among all distance learning design and support services, including instructional design team members, instructional technologists, distance learning student support staff, distance learning library staff, etc.

#### *Technology Infrastructure*

- The technology infrastructure is stable;
- Technology is consistently available and capable of supporting the current and future course load and student enrollment;
- Faculty and course design professionals provided input concerning the selection of the distance learning course management system.

#### *Support Services for Students*

- Student orientation and preparation is well developed, providing several choices for student access, including a face-to-face option with hands-on orientation to the distance learning environment as well as a complete orientation process delivered online;
- Single call center or one-stop resource for distance learning students, providing advising, tutoring, financial aid, testing, library assistance, etc.;

- Distance learning services are supported by a dedicated funding stream, such as a distance learning fee;
- Strong evaluation of support services and course delivery and design.

#### *Curriculum and Design*

- Strong course quality assurance process with a peer review requirement using a framework such as Quality Matters;
- The development of system standards for course quality and student engagement;
- Clear process for course approval and regular systematic review and updates;
- Common course templates with flexible component options;
- Strong course development teams with course development, instructional design, and technology application specialists working directly with the faculty content experts.

#### *Faculty Issues*

- Instructional designer staff and support for faculty is available at each campus;
- There is a strong faculty distance learning training and preparation system.

#### *Marketing and Branding*

- No insights concerning strengths in distance learning marketing and branding. (adapted from Carstens, D.R., 2008a)

### **Observed Challenges of Benchmark Distance Learning Programs**

#### *Governance and Planning*

- Maintaining and updating the distance learning curriculum can become difficult once the distance learning programs are established;

- Maintaining organizational capacity to support the growing number of distance learning students;
- Competition and lack of cooperation among colleges/campuses or between the colleges and system can emerge when the distance learning program is organized in a multi-college district as an independent entity.

#### *Technology Infrastructure*

- Building and maintaining a technology infrastructure with scalability;
- Problems with technology were observed when the distance learning department did not have oversight for technology.

#### *Support Services for Students*

- Outsourcing of student services and assurance of quality;
- The capacity to provide distance learning student support has not kept pace with distance learning enrollment growth.

#### *Curriculum and Design*

- No student cohort engagement or interaction (when distance learning courses are offered as independent study);
- Overly prescriptive course templates (e.g. “canned courses”).

#### *Faculty Issues*

- Courses are taught almost exclusively by adjunct faculty, with little to no full-time faculty involvement;
- If the distance learning program is operated as an independent entity, it results in a lack of full-time faculty involvement and reliance on adjuncts for an overwhelming majority of course development and delivery.

#### *Marketing and Branding*

- Marketing efforts to develop a distance learning brand are not consistent. (adapted from Carstens, D.R., 2008a)

## **STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES OF LSCS DISTANCE LEARNING**

Through a review of local observations and experiences with the LSCS distance learning program, the task force previously assembled an initial list of issues, challenges, or strengths in the LSCS distance learning program, which were then analyzed and consolidated to create a list of perceived barriers to full implementation of distance learning at LSCS (listed in Chapter Four).

Following the meetings with other distance learning practitioners, the task force turned again to discuss aspects of the LSCS distance learning program. With new insights and comparative perspectives emerging from the meetings with other distance learning practitioners, the task force examined again the LSCS distance learning program with the purpose of reaffirming strengths to preserve and clarifying challenges to address in the LSCS distance learning program.

### **Observed Strengths of the LSCS Distance Learning Program**

#### *Governance and Planning*

- Offers complete online distance learning programs for students: the Associate of Arts, Associate of Science, Management Associate of Applied Science, Legal Office Associate of Applied Science, Medical Office Associate of Applied Science, Core Curriculum, and 20 certificates in the following specializations:
  - Administrative Assistant;
  - Administrative Support;
  - Bilingual Office Specialist;
  - E-Business Web Developer;
  - General Business;
  - Human Resources;
  - Information Technology;

- Legal Administrative Assistant;
- Legal Office Receptionist;
- Legal Secretary;
- Marketing;
- Medical Administrative Assistant;
- Medical Office Receptionist;
- Medical Office Specialist;
- Microsoft Office Specialist;
- Office Assistant Specialization;
- PC Desktop Specialist;
- PC Support Specialist;
- Programming Specialist;
- Small Business Management;
- Strong enrollment and enrollment growth;
- Hundreds of courses online in the following areas of study:
  - Accounting;
  - Anthropology;
  - Art;
  - Biology;
  - Business;
  - Computer Information Technology;
  - Criminal Justice;
  - Drama;

- Economics;
- Education;
- Emergency Medical Services Professions;
- English;
- Fire Science Technology;
- Foreign Languages;
- Geography;
- Geology;
- Government;
- Health Information Technology;
- History;
- Hospitality Management;
- Human Development;
- Humanities;
- Interior Design Technology;
- Journalism;
- Logistics Management;
- Management;
- Mathematics;
- Medical Assisting;
- Music;
- Nursing;
- Paralegal Studies;

- Philosophy;
- Physical Activity (Kinesiology);
- Physical Therapist Assistant;
- Physics;
- Professional Office Technology;
- Psychology;
- Sociology;
- Speech;
- Visual Communication.

#### *Technology Infrastructure*

- No new observations.

#### *Support Services for Students*

- Dedicated distance learning service desk for students and faculty.

#### *Curriculum and Design*

- Course design that encourages student engagement in the online environment;
- Pockets of faculty innovation and creativity.

#### *Faculty Issues*

- Center for Teaching and Distance Learning training program and certification requirements;
- Dedicated distance learning service desk for students and faculty;
- Strong interest among faculty to participate in distance learning.

#### *Marketing and Branding*

- No new observations. (adapted from Carstens, D.R., 2008a)

## **Observed Challenges of the LSCS Distance Learning Program**

### *Governance and Planning*

- Need to expand the number of distance learning courses and degrees and specifically target student needs;
- Lack of coordinated planning between colleges in course development, standards, and scheduling for course offerings;
- Perceived competition among deans due to the current LSCS internal funding allocation formula;
- Lack stable funding source for distance learning operations;
- Inability to quickly offer courses in response to market needs.

### *Technology Infrastructure*

- Technology infrastructure is unstable and unreliable;
- Lack of technology tools to enable class capture and other features to enhance curriculum design and instruction;
- Lack of scalability for technology resources.

### *Support Services for Students*

- Limited and inconsistent student support services;
- Lack of scalability for student support resources.

### *Curriculum and Design*

- A lack of common standards for course quality and a means for peer evaluation across the system;
- Course renewal process is not supported;
- Inability to quickly offer courses with adherence to quality standards.

### *Faculty Issues*

- Lack of scalability for faculty support resources.



### *Marketing and Branding*

- No new observations. (adapted from Carstens, D.R., 2008a)

## **TASK FORCE CONCLUSIONS**

As the task force considered the above foundational questions, the information received from other institutions, and the perceived strengths and challenges of the LSCS distance learning program, several key conclusions evolved during the task force meetings that guided the development of the administrative proposal. The conclusions dealt with a basic strategy for the future of the distance learning program, the focus of the program, the organizational model, and the online learning environment.

### **Preserve Our Core Strengths**

The LSCS distance learning program has evolved with time and experience. Some characteristics of the program have emerged as a consequence of our district's culture and values. Rather than ignore our history and the expertise we have developed, the administrative proposal should "preserve the core strengths of the LSCS distance learning program while addressing concerns for quality, consistency, and scalability" (Carstens, D.R., 2008a, p. 6). Instead of ignoring our prior and current capabilities, the recommendations should be designed to move the college district toward maximizing our potential for meeting current and future distance learning student needs.

### **Focus on Our Core Market**

Rather than pursue expanded markets such as the armed forces or international programs, we should first focus our efforts on creating a scalable distance learning program that serves our local market well with quality and consistency. Other market opportunities will emerge as a consequence of increased quality and consistency.

## **Preserve Faculty Involvement**

Our faculty represent a core strength. The LSCS distance learning program has enjoyed strong interest among faculty. While faculty acceptance of distance learning is an issue both locally and nationally, it is less of an issue in our college district. Some of our prior distance learning guidelines were developed to help manage faculty interest that exceeded our capacity to support their involvement. The task force concluded that widespread involvement and commitment of full time faculty in distance learning is a strategic organizational strength and benefit that should be preserved.

## **Strengthen Our Organizational Model**

The task force was initially inclined to avoid the creation in the district of a sixth college focused on distance learning. Based on the current funding model, a sixth college would create a significant negative economic impact on the other colleges if funding for distance learning contact hours were redirected to a sixth institution.

As the task force discussed insights from the meetings with practitioners of other distance learning programs, a trend emerged concerning the organizational models for distance learning programs observed at the benchmark multi-college districts.

Two organizational models for establishing a distance learning program in a multi-college district surfaced among the benchmark institutions: a) the creation of a separate distance learning entity that functions as an autonomous institution with focused expertise, and b) the establishment of a collaborative distance learning service area that coordinates efforts among the multiple campuses and/or departments.

The task force members felt that each model had disadvantages. They observed that the autonomous distance learning colleges tended to be heavily supported by adjunct faculty and created internal competition among the other campuses of the multi-college districts that employed this model. The collaborative service area model tended to exhibit

a negative impact on funding, consistency, and planning in the college districts that followed this model.

Based on the perceived disadvantages of the autonomous distance learning college model and the desire to maintain full time faculty involvement in distance learning, the task force reaffirmed support for maintaining the current collaborative service area model for distance learning at LSCS. The administrative proposal would therefore need to focus on strengthening the perceived weaknesses of this model.

### **Preserve the LSCS Course Design Model**

As the task force reflected on perceptions of the benchmark distance learning programs, the LSCS distance learning instructional and course design strategy emerged as a foundational and important characteristic that should be preserved. This aspect of the distance learning program is not an administrative condition nor service, but rather the instructional and course design model that LSCS has embraced in order to promote student interaction and engagement within the online course environment. The LSCS distance learning program has historically emphasized cohort-based delivery of courses over independent study as a method of encouraging student interaction and engagement, believing that this strategy was important for student learning and success in an online course.

While instructional aspects of distance learning courses are not the focus of this study, this particular element of the distance learning environment is mentioned here because the administrative conditions necessary to support development and delivery of independent study courses are not the same as those needed to support cohort-based online courses in which students are concurrently enrolled and expected to interact with one another in accomplishing course objectives. This insight influenced the task force in identifying several of the perceived strengths to preserve and challenges to avoid in the

LSCS distance learning program. The conclusion to continue support for this type of online learning environment also influenced the recommendations from the task force.

#### **ACTION PLAN: LSCS DISTANCE LEARNING ADMINISTRATIVE PROPOSAL**

The administrative proposal was prepared and submitted to the chancellor of the Lone Star College System for review and consideration. The proposal from the task force included recommendations for administrative conditions and services that should be established to support the LSCS distance learning program and move it toward maximizing the potential for meeting current and future distance learning student needs.

Based on findings and observations of distance learning programs at LSCS and the benchmarking institutions, the task force proposed the following recommendations to preserve the core strengths of the LSCS distance learning program while addressing concerns for quality, consistency, and scalability. The proposal suggested that the LSCS distance learning program (then known as the eCampus) be marketed as the ‘eCollege,’ with the following recommendations designed to move the college system toward maximizing the potential for meeting current and future student needs (Carstens, D.R., 2008a).

##### *Governance and Planning*

- Strengthen the current service area model for the eCollege, supporting the Lone Star College System’s core strengths, through: collaboration among colleges for degree and program delivery, utilization of full-time faculty and instructors, and preserving a course design that encourages student engagement in eCollege distance learning courses.
- Establish an Associate Vice Chancellor (AVC) of the eCollege and additional staffing to support the listed recommendations (see proposed organizational model in Figure 5.1 below). The AVC will be a member of the Vice Presidents Council (VPIC) and the Council for Education and Student Development (CESD).

- Create the eCollege Users Group, chaired by the eCollege AVC, and including system-wide faculty and student services representation. The users group will provide input concerning issues surrounding course development, course quality, training, student services, technology support, ongoing distance learning operations, services, and processes. The eCollege Users Group will evaluate the eCollege Plan and provide input to the eCollege AVC regarding suggestions for improvement or modification.
- The eCollege AVC and Vice Presidents of Instruction Council (VPIC) will function as the eCollege Oversight Committee and will develop the annual eCollege Plan in collaboration with the Chief Information Officer (CIO), and with input from the eCollege Users Group. The eCollege Plan will include a vision for the Lone Star distance learning program and associated services, as well as a DL course and program development timetable based on student needs, and a coordinated schedule for program delivery across the five LSC campuses. The Oversight Committee will be charged with recommending to EC a revenue sharing and campus participation model.
- The LSC Executive Council will function as the eCollege Steering Committee, for approval of the annual eCollege Plan and revenue sharing model.
- The Oversight Committee will establish a phase-in plan for peer/quality review and application of a common template to existing distance learning courses.
- Utilize the resources resulting from the proposed Distance Learning Fee to fund expanded student support services and quality enhancements for the LSCS eCollege.
- The eCollege Oversight Committee will establish standards for common online instructional technologies and tools used by distance learning, hybrid, and on-campus courses and assure that all courses adhere to the agreed upon definitions of distance learning formats.

### *Technology Infrastructure*

- Create an eCollege technology plan and secure a technology infrastructure that supports distance learning goals and activities, and meets the needs of both students and faculty for presenting information, interacting within the distance learning community, and gaining access to distance learning resources.
  - IT will have responsibility for implementing, supporting, and maintaining a stable eCollege technology platform and distance learning infrastructure. The eCollege will be responsible and accountable for determining technology systems necessary to support eCollege services.
  - The eCollege course management system (CMS), currently Blackboard Vista, needs to be stable and accessible. The eCollege AVC will periodically review the functionality of the current CMS compared to current and anticipated needs.
  - The LSC network infrastructure needs to be stable, scalable, and appropriately designed to exceed current instructional usage requirements of eCollege technologies as well as instructional technologies used at LSC campuses and centers.
  - Create a Lone Star College – eCollege website with links to a full complement of student services, interactive tools such as chat, and creating a one-stop site for access to distance learning services and courses.
  - eCollege and supporting network technology maintenance processes should be scheduled to avoid conflicts with distance learning student needs and instructional peaks and timeframes.

### *Support Services for Students*

- To improve consistency and address identified barriers, eCollege will implement a plan to ensure that the key processes and services related to distance learning student services, such as registration, advising, assessment, tutoring, library resources, bookstore services, etc. are convenient and efficient.

- Provide responsive and accessible online student services, including advising, tutoring, registration, etc., with schedules to accommodate distance learning users.
- Address integrity issues for online and proctored assessments for all eCollege courses.
- Ensure that all eCollege courses can be offered online without requiring specific campus visits for orientation, testing, etc.
- Ensure a secure and reliable online testing process.
- Develop campus and online delivery options for required distance learning orientation.
- Provide staffing to support seasonal distance learning service peaks and holiday breaks (registration, semester startup, etc.).
- Develop online environments for distance learning student clubs and activities.
- Administer student evaluations of eCollege services and course delivery for all courses and provide feedback to academic deans and eCollege staff to improve the eCollege services and courses.
- Provide a mandatory distance learning readiness self-assessment tool for the registration process.
- Charge the Oversight Committee with the development of criteria and processes to restrict distance learning enrollment for students with serious risk factors, when appropriate.

### *Curriculum & Design*

- Create a consistent eCollege ‘branded’ distance learning experience for LSCS distance learning students, by developing a common course template for all distance learning. The template will provide a common framework and consistent expectations for course navigation, icons, tools, orientation, objectives, the syllabus, instructor feedback, student-to-student interaction, etc.

while providing for faculty innovation and academic enhancement of courses.

- Centralize key processes and services related to course development at the eCollege to improve quality assurance and consistency, to address identified barriers, and to sustain system-wide quality standards.
- Provide an eCollege staffing plan to support the course development process (a proposed plan is shown in Figure 5.1, below).
- Include retention and success rates as factors in the quality review process with a goal of improvement each review period.
- Develop collaborative course design teams utilizing instructional technologists, librarians, student services personnel, and instructional designers working directly with faculty members who provide subject matter expertise.
- In collaboration with college administrators, hire and assign an eCollege instructional designer to work at the main campus of each college, with reporting relationship to eCollege.
- Adopt Quality Matters (or other peer review quality assurance system) as a peer-based approach to course development, quality standards, quality assurance, and continuous improvement for all new and existing eCollege distance learning courses, including scheduled course review cycles for all existing courses, with a priority for top enrollment courses.
- The Oversight Committee will establish a phase-in plan for peer/quality review and application of a common template to existing distance learning courses.

#### *Faculty Issues*

- To improve consistency and address identified barriers, provide support for faculty development and involvement and assure that services are accessible and effective.



- Revise the professional development and training program to meet the enhanced quality standards, including a strengthened faculty distance learning certification process with interactive online modules.
- Develop an expanded pool of qualified distance learning faculty.
- Create a faculty recruitment and training plan to expand the pool of faculty with expertise in distance learning.
- Remove the 50% faculty distance learning load guideline with the understanding that workweek guidelines will remain in effect.
- Provide support and encouragement for innovation that enhances the learning experience and ensures faculty involvement in the course design and development process.
- Provide coordination for distance learning testing, including supplemental staffing to ensure equitable and convenient access to testing locations for faculty who do not provide online testing.

#### *Marketing and Branding*

- Create a strong quality brand identity for the 'eCollege' distance learning experience through creation of a branded web site design that is easy to navigate and provides comprehensive access to all distance learning courses, faculty support, and student services.
  - The LSCS distance learning program will be branded as 'eCollege.'
  - Develop the eCollege brand via targeted marketing supporting LSCS general branding efforts and specific distance learning programmatic goals.
  - Develop a standard for consistent look and feel in all eCollege courses, as part of the branding process and to facilitate learning and ease of use. (adapted from Carstens, D.R., 2008a)

### **Proposed eCollege Organizational Model**

The collaborative service area model outlined in the task force recommendations is illustrated below in Figure 5.1. The task force suggested hiring 24 additional full time staff to accomplish the recommendations (highlighted in gray), along with additional part time positions as needed during peak demand periods. The administrative proposal's model represents a conceptual framework, illustrating how the eCollege integrates with the proposed steering committee, oversight committee, and users group. The final organizational structure will ultimately be determined by LSCS administration.

See Figure 5.1 on the next page.

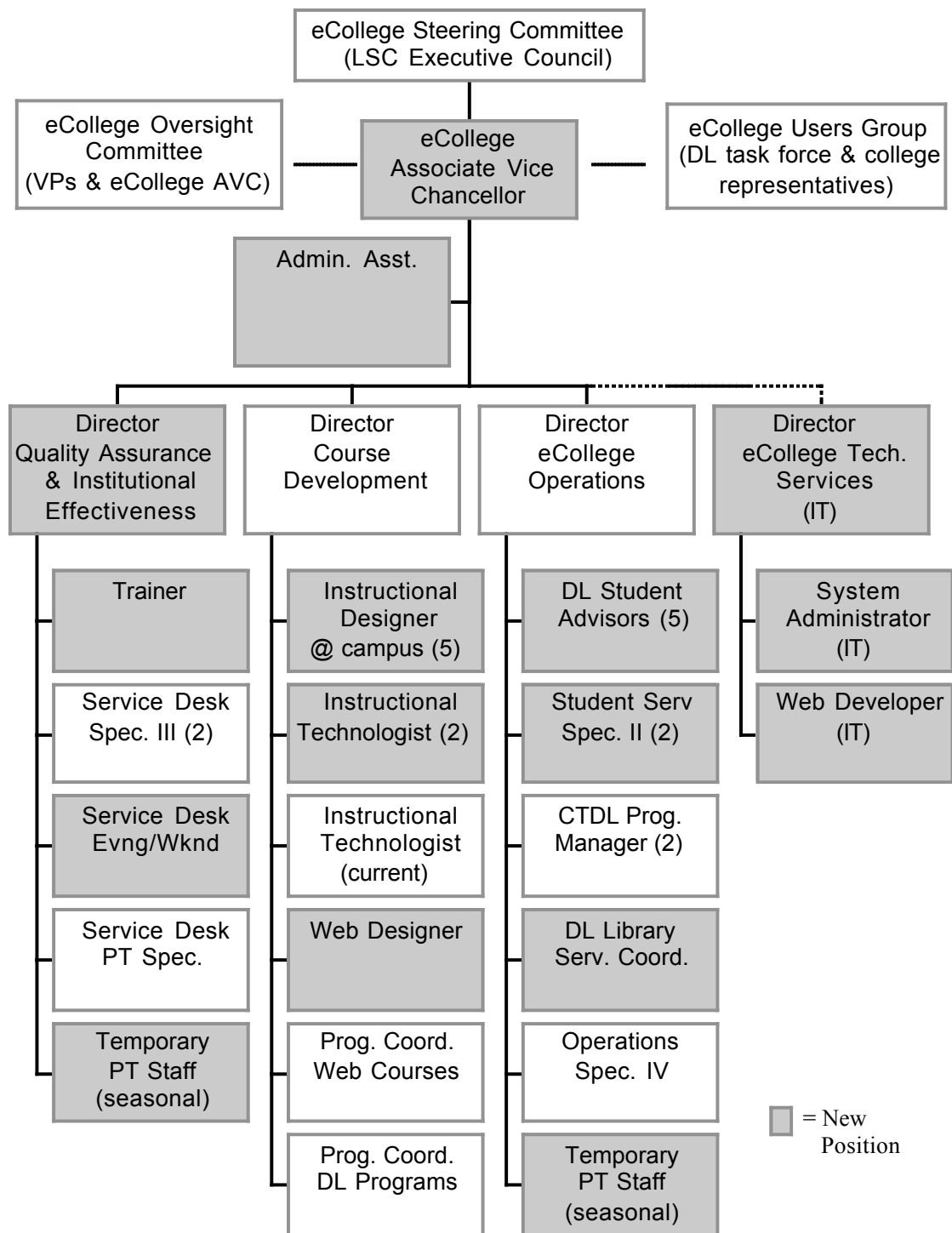


Figure 5.1. Proposed eCollege Organizational Model  
Source: (Carstens, D.R., 2008a)

## **Proposed eCollege Resources in Support of Recommendations**

To support the resources necessary to accomplish the administrative proposal's recommendations and objectives, the task force recommended the establishment of a distance learning fee of \$10 per credit hour for all credit distance learning courses. The requested effective date for the fee was the Fall 2008 semester.

Based on an evaluation of practices supporting an effective distance learning program as observed at the benchmark community colleges, a distance learning fee emerged as a viable administrative option for augmenting a permanent funding structure for distance learning at LSCS.

The task force reviewed practices in distance learning among the benchmark institutions, which indicated that a dedicated funding stream for online education is essential for quality, support for student success, and scalability. The recommended fee should therefore support:

- the instructional design process;
- expansion of degrees and courses available online;
- enhanced online student services such as tutoring, advising, registration, and technology assistance;
- expanded training and assistance for faculty;
- implementation of quality standards;
- marketing to students. (adapted from Carstens, D.R., 2008a)

The budget for the eCollege has historically been insufficient to provide the necessary services and infrastructure described in the proposed recommendations. The addition of a dedicated distance learning fee was viewed as an essential next step in the ongoing development of the LSCS distance learning program. Below is a chart of proposed resources necessary to support the proposal's recommendations.

Table 5.1

*Proposed eCollege Resources in Support of Recommendations*

Description	Quant.	Unit cost	+ 25% benefits	Total costs
<b><i>Proposed New Personnel</i></b>				
<i>(leadership, planning)</i>				
eCollege Assoc. Vice Chancellor	1	110,000	137,500	137,500
Administrative Assistant	1	32,000	40,000	40,000
<i>(research, measurement)</i>				
Quality & Institutional Effectiveness Analyst	1	62,000	77,500	77,500
<i>(course design teams)</i>				
Instructional Designer	5	56,000	70,000	350,000
Instructional Technologist	2	42,000	52,500	105,000
Web Designer	1	42,000	52,500	52,500
<i>(train the trainer capability)</i>				
Trainer	1	42,000	52,500	52,500
<i>(admissions, registration)</i>				
Distance Learning (DL) Student Advisor	5	30,000	37,500	187,500

*(table continues)*

Description	Quant.	Unit cost	+ 25% benefits	Total costs
<i>(library and student support)</i>				
DL Library Services Coordinator	1	50,000	62,500	62,500
Specialist II, Student Services	2	28,000	35,000	70,000
<i>(distance learning help desk)</i>				
Help Desk – Weekend and Night	1	30,000	37,500	37,500
<i>(technical support and operations)</i>				
Director, eCollege Technology Services	1	66,500	83,125	83,125
System Administrator	1	51,000	63,750	63,750
Web Developer	1	42,000	52,500	52,500
<i>(course development)</i>				
Faculty Stipends	100	2,000		200,000
<i>(temporary extra capacity for peak demand)</i>				
Part-time wages for semester startup	1	14,040		14,040
Subtotal for proposed new personnel:			\$1,585,915	
<b><i>Current eCollege Personnel:</i></b>				
<i>(course design teams and management)</i>				
District Director of Distance Learning and Instructional Technology	1			
Instructional Technologist	1			
<i>(table continues)</i>				

Description	Quant.	Unit cost	+ 25% benefits	Total costs
Program Coordinator, Web Courses	1			
Program Coordinator, Distance Learning and Instructional Programs	1			
<i>(operations and support staff and management)</i>				
Director of the Center for Teaching and Distance Learning	1			
Operations Specialist IV	1			
CTDL Program Manager	2			
<i>(distance learning help desk)</i>				
Specialist V, Distance Learning Help Desk	1			
Specialist III, Distance Learning Help Desk	1			
Part-time specialists	varies			
Subtotal for current eCollege personnel:				<b>\$509,470</b>
<b><i>Current eCollege Operating Funds:</i></b>				
Supplies, travel, contractual services, operations, etc.				<b>\$219,389</b>

*(table continues)*

Description	Quant.	Unit cost	+ 25% benefits	Total costs
<b><i>Proposed Technology Resources:</i></b>				
<i>(annual costs)</i>				
Content management system				220,000
Vista portfolios				15,000
Vista SMS text messaging				15,000
Tegrity class capture system				100,000
SmarThinking tutoring system				20,000
Quality Matters				62,500
READI distance learning readiness tool				4,000
Turnitin.com				35,000
Horizon Wimba collaboration system				25,000
Social community system				50,000
High bandwidth Internet access			(provided by IT)	
Backup systems for servers			(provided by IT)	
<i>(three year replacement)</i>				
Servers for above software tools				250,000
Subtotal for proposed technology resources:				<b>\$796,500</b>
<b><i>Total for Proposed eCollege Resources (first year):</i></b>				<b>\$3,111,274</b>

Source: (Carstens, D.R., 2008a)



## **Suggested Steps for Implementation**

In preparing the administrative proposal, the task force spent time considering operational action items that would need immediate attention in the first few months following a decision on the proposal. The task force suggested that a small team be convened to quickly prepare a separate document providing more details concerning the specific personnel, technology solutions, and services that would need to be set in place during the upcoming year.

As an immediate step, the task force recommended the following services be operational for pilot use in Fall 2008.

- Expanded SmarThinking tutoring service capacity;
- Distance learning readiness assessment tool (READI) for students;
- Quality framework & peer evaluation tool selected, with training in Summer 2008 (Quality Matters™ is proposed);
- Implementation of initial suite of online student services—advising, financial aid, and online orientation. (adapted from Carstens, D.R., 2008a)

The task force recommended that the proposed eCollege Users Group be established immediately to research and implement the above action items.

The task force requested that the CIO review the administrative proposal with the eCollege AVC and suggest technology options to address the above services.

## **Anticipated Outcomes via Aggressive Funding**

The college system should take a measured approach to cultural changes that may be required in order to implement the distance learning proposal's recommendations. Yet with appropriate and aggressive funding, the task force anticipated the following outcomes could be achieved.

*Year One (FY2009)*

- Initial quality assurance framework training program established;
- Initial online student services operational;
- Common course template developed and implemented in selected courses;
- Enhanced quality in course design;
- Timeline created for program development and course updates;
- Implement initial online student services;
- Improved student success and retention, commencing year one and ongoing;
- Approval of three-year formal eCollege Plan for course, program, and degree offerings and distance learning student services (updated annually thereafter);
- Commence two-year phase-in plan for updating all courses to meet system quality and design standards.

*Year Two (FY2010)*

- Improved student and faculty satisfaction, commencing year two and ongoing;
- Comprehensive eCollege web site available with online tools for teaching and learning;
- Comprehensive eCollege student services deployed;
- Strengthen brand awareness, quality, and loyalty for LSC—eCollege.

*Year Three (FY2011)*

- All eCollege courses fully meet system quality and design standards;
- Commencement of course renewal timeline. (adapted from Carstens, D.R., 2008a)

## **FEEDBACK FROM BENCHMARK DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAMS**

Following the formal submission of the administrative proposal, the researcher shared the proposal with external distance learning practitioners who had participated in discussions with task force members. Insights, expertise, and suggestions were requested regarding the report's findings and recommendations. The researcher suggested the practitioners consider the following questions about the report as an aid in formulating their comments:

- The task force endeavored to aggregate and summarize the observed strengths and challenges among the benchmark institutions without specifically identifying each institution in the process. Did we correctly interpret and/or capture your situation within some of the points listed for the group of colleges?
- What aspects of the proposal's recommendations appear to be innovative or, based on your experience, might prove to be helpful? Which recommendations appear feasible?
- What aspects of the proposal's recommendations appear to present challenges that you anticipate the college district would need to address as a result of implementing the recommendations? If applicable, have you observed such challenges at your current institution or at other institutions?
- Does the proposal provide any new insights for your local distance learning program to consider, or did the proposal's information trigger any new ideas that both LSC and your institution would benefit from studying further? Does it raise any new questions for you?
- If your own distance learning program is undergoing current or announced changes since we last spoke, I would appreciate learning about the new steps you are taking to address your distance learning issues and needs.

A summary is shared below of the feedback received from external distance learning practitioners who had participated in discussions with task force members.

*General Comments*

- I think your report hit all the important points and looks GREAT!
- I think you did a very nice job of capturing the issues not only at your institution but also in your benchmark group. I am reading the proposal and would like to use parts of this to help start conversations on our campus. I would like to ask your permission to share this document with our distance learning committee.
- The proposed model helps achieve better scale and overall quality control.
- Your recommendations do seem to fit your institution.
- You do a nice job of supporting your new positions with the increased number of students enrolled for DL classes.
- I have very few comments on the proposal. It is well written. The ideas it presents are sound and will bode well for the institution, the faculty and most importantly the students.
- I hope this is approved for you because you will have a more solid distance learning program if it is. Thanks for letting me review your proposal.
- I enjoyed reading your very comprehensive proposal. You all are definitely on the right track with this proposal.
- You captured our situation within some of the points listed. I read statements which align with our philosophies and beliefs such as references to systems, scalability, quality, services, coordination, technology infrastructure, etc.
- Your task force's report is right on the mark, from my perspective.
- All of your recommendations seem to be appropriate and feasible over time.

- I read the draft of your report and I applaud you for your efforts to integrate and include distance learning as a part of all of the institution's campuses and educational life.
- You have hit all the buttons.
- We liked the report approach you have. We may use the categories in our own sorting of internal recommendations.
- I looked at the report and the group did a very good job.
- Funding is a major issue. Related to the technology fees, we just raised them. They are underwriting current staff but they are insufficient for adding new staff to keep up with the growing demand. Building a stable funding source that keeps up with growth is essential.
- The plan is a good one and very comprehensive. It is likely to be very expensive. What if you do not get all the funding it requires? I saw the timetable, but is that the right set of priorities if you are not fully funded or does it assume full funding at some point? It might be good to prioritize the recommendations and separate those with little or no cost and those that will yield the most bang for the buck where cost is involved. Then establish a timetable based on those clearly stated priorities.
- This proposal looks like a lot of change. Can LSC absorb such a hit? I did not see what the target was. What is the goal? Is it implied in enrollment numbers? At our institution we have a goal of 25 percent of our students getting their degree online. We also want to do more international programs.
- Overall, your proposal seems to be very comprehensive. However, because it encompasses so much, it is important that you focus your efforts and resources on the most crucial goals that you want to accomplish. With that in mind, I suggest that you define in more detail what you want to accomplish in the way of improving quality, consistency, and scalability so that your recommendations and anticipated outcomes all relate to these three over-arching goals. For example: How will you know when you have achieved consistency in student services and in online courses? What are the desired characteristics of a scalable program/system? Is improvement in course completion evidence of quality?

### *Governance and Planning*

- I commend your recommendation to centralize key processes and services.
- The governance structure is innovative and appears to foster cooperation and collaboration. Communication among the Users Group, The Oversight Committee, and the Steering Committee is crucial to its success.
- I especially liked your governance structure, which creates a kind of internal consortium that respects the ideal of shared governance.
- I like the way the organization is laid out. As we go through our own transition this gave a lot of insight into how we are organized.
- What is in it for the individual colleges? Will the eCollege be seen as a competitor for students and their best faculty? I might have missed it, but there needs to be a clear win-win for eCollege and the traditional colleges.
- I agree that the most efficient structure for a district-wide eLearning solution is one that fosters cooperation/collaboration among the colleges, that reduces unnecessary duplication of effort, and that efficiently shares resources. If you succeed with this, you will have a national model for others to follow. The major challenge of implementing the recommendations will be to ensure that the system prevails and that the individual colleges that participate continue to reap benefits from the system.
- I liked your governance ideas. Working collaboratively in our district has been a challenge because the colleges are accredited separately.

### *Technology Infrastructure*

- The technology infrastructure is critical. Demands are urgent for distance learning when the technology doesn't work.
- I commend your recommendation to increase technology stability.
- The distance learning help desk and IT infrastructure are part of the distance learning operation at our institution. They are not separated over to the IT area. If you had separate technology areas (IT and DL) you will need to work closely together and the two areas will need to trust each other.

### *Support Services for Students*

- The challenges listed are not unique to your school, as all of us look for ways to maintain a high level of service and support with increased enrollments.
- I don't see anything about financial aid support online. I am certain you have that but I didn't see it listed. Counseling is also not listed but that is a slippery slope that I personally don't think you should get into.
- Your manpower increases are sound and well thought out. They will provide you with the personnel necessary to maintain a solid distance learning structure across the entire system.
- I commend your recommendation to provide core student services online and to use SmarThinking.
- We use co-sourcing for our help desk. We have a contract with Presidium and we also have live help desk staff.
- The report notes the number of full-time students who take some or all of their load online. This is a national trend and something that I think causes the most consternation within multi-campus systems. The general idea is that technology has eliminated geographic co-location as a defining factor in the relationship between students and campuses, so how do we facilitate student mobility?
- The strengths among benchmarks in student support mentioned in the report is true. We have "cradle to grave" services, from admission application to graduation services. This has been part of

our success, to control “slippage” (retention, attrition). Students should never have to come to campus. Successful distance learning programs have a process that requires no trips to campuses.

### *Curriculum and Design*

- I commend your recommendation to staff course development support areas.
- I was glad to see you mention Quality Matters as a national benchmark.
- The recommendation for a consistent standard course is an excellent idea.
- For our program, the key challenge is about quality.
- Concerning the quality assurance process, don’t imply it. Say that it is ongoing and continuous.
- Ongoing course monitoring of interactivity has been a key tool for us. If the instructor has not been interacting in the course during the past three days, we are flagged by the learning management system and then we check on it.
- We are also using Quality Matters.
- I agree that you need to build a process model that is scalable. In order to expand capacity, we could not continue to custom develop multiple versions of each course for multiple individual faculty.
- Be careful how many courses you build. It is hard to maintain the courses once they are built.
- My guess is that one of your challenges, which you will sooner or later run into, is the major problem we all discover—i.e. maintaining the courses you’ve developed. Since meeting with you we have analyzed the usage of the 100 plus online courses we’ve developed and identified 36 that we will continue to maintain. We are turning over the remainder (courses for which only five or fewer sections are offered annually) to the campuses to maintain if they so desire.



### *Faculty Issues*

- I commend your recommendation to provide faculty training.
- You might consider, in the faculty and staff development section, looking at a Sloan Consortium membership for the system so that faculty and staff could take advantage of the webinars and certification programs that Sloan-C has created.

### *Marketing and Branding*

- I commend your recommendation to create a brand identity for eCollege.
- I know that you have changed from eCampus to eCollege. Nonetheless, I hope that your brand will not be confused with the eCollege hosted services now owned by Pearson Publishing.
- The report mentions the need for a common brand—the eCollege—but I don't see any staffing or funding for a single marketing effort. One benefit to increased collaboration is that you can have a single landing page on the website for all inquiries, so that potential students can easily see what is available at all locations and so that the site itself gets more hits and thus shows up higher on the list when prospects google 'online learning.' Marketing is a key central task and a real opportunity to gain cost efficiency while improving recruiting.

## **FEEDBACK FROM CONSULTANTS**

Following the formal submission of the administrative proposal, the chancellor of the Lone Star College System privately requested and received feedback on the proposal from consultants who were trusted contacts. They provided opinions unfettered from internal institutional constraints or context. The feedback consisted of a general perspective of the report as well as specific ideas for implementation of the distance learning program.

## **Perspective**

Observations among the consultants were similar. As outsiders unfamiliar with LSCS internal processes, their broad insights were not focused on the specific recommendations related to internal procedures or services. Rather, the trend in the insights related to the perspective from which they perceived the proposal was guided and developed. They provided the following high-level insights about the proposal.

- It was not focused enough on identifying and addressing the demands of the market and students.
- It was too faculty centric.
- It was not geared around student need.
- It was not market driven.
- The political governance framework was entangling.

Thus, while the proposal's recommendations are admirably devoted to increasing the quality and consistency of the teaching and learning experience for distance learning faculty and students, the consultants perceived that the proposal was fairly introspective and was driven largely from the standpoint of *providing* distance learning opportunities rather than *responding* to distance learning needs.

## **Implementation**

Additional suggestions from the consultants were guided by the above insights and focused on specific themes related to implementation of the distance learning recommendations. The suggested strategy was to pursue initial actions that provide the highest initial impact. Trends for the suggested actions concentrated primarily in the areas of course development, student retention, course quality, and governance. A summary of the suggestions related to implementation is listed below.

*Course Development.* To have the highest initial impact, the LSCS distance learning program should focus initial course development efforts specifically on the top high-enrollment online courses representing 70 percent of distance learning enrollments.

*Retention.* Focus on developing various resources and processes to address retention, such as developing online student and faculty resources, articulating student and faculty expectations, addressing student retention check points during the semester, providing student assistance, and implementing proactive communications to students regarding assessments, surveys, pre-advising, and re-enrollment processes.

*Course Quality.* Focus on key aspects of developing and delivering a course. This includes formulating a uniform course design, using a rubric to guide design, mapping outcomes to objectives, assessing the course, and articulating faculty expectations and certification requirements.

*Governance.* The recommendations of the task force report address the district's broad issues for the distance learning program—achieving economies of scale, and developing and maintaining consistent brand and course quality. To ensure that the task force recommendations are implemented, the college system should pursue more central control of key distance learning administrative conditions and services that provide accountability for success of the program, such as course design and development, assessment, planning, support services, retention efforts, training, research, etc.

## **LSCS INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE AND ACTION PLAN**

At the time of this writing, the Lone Star College System Board of Trustees and college leadership have taken several actions toward improving the district's ability to meet current and future distance learning student needs. Although the chancellor is empowered to conduct administrative actions according to his best judgment, the recent

actions have been generally responsive to recommendations of the task force as well as suggestions received from the consultants.

### **Distance Learning Fee**

The board approved the establishment of a distance learning fee, adding \$10 per credit hour to each distance learning course. The funds will be used to support the distance learning operations.

### **Associate Vice Chancellor**

The chancellor created an Associate Vice Chancellor (AVC) position to lead the distance learning program. This is a high level position equivalent to a vice-president on one of the campuses. This researcher served on the interview committee for this position, which was filled during the summer of 2008. The new AVC was tasked with developing an institutional action plan for distance learning.

### **Lone Star College–Online**

The new AVC suggested changing the name of the distance learning program. Recognizing the possible conflict with the commercial eCollege entity, the AVC opted away from the proposed ‘eCollege’ label and designated the distance learning program as ‘Lone Star College–Online’ or LSC–Online.

### **Course Development Initiative**

To have the highest initial impact on achieving consistent quality for LSC–Online courses, the LSC–Online program will develop and implement a consistent quality and branded design for the top high-enrollment online courses representing 70 percent of LSCS distance learning enrollments. Initial course development efforts will focus specifically on 30 distance learning courses.

## **Lone Star College–Online Action Plan**

Through a quick review of prior enrollment data, the new AVC determined that 58 percent of students who enrolled in a distance learning course successfully completed the course in the Spring 2008 semester. When factoring out students who withdrew from a distance learning course prior to the semester's official reporting day, 72 percent of distance learning students were completers (personal communication, August 2008). Of the 58 percent who enrolled in and completed a distance learning course, 75 percent had re-enrolled in some type of course (distance learning or traditional) at LSC for the next semester, while only 40 percent of the students who did not complete the distance learning course re-enrolled in an LSC course for the next semester. The AVC concluded that the distance learning program should pursue improving student completion rates for the benefit of the students and also as a means of increasing student retention from one semester to the next.

The essential goal for the LSC–Online program that prompted this study is to foster current and future distance learning student success. The success of the LSC–Online program will therefore be determined by its ability to improve student success, as measured by student completion rates (grade C or higher), student retention rates, and student satisfaction.

To effectively improve student success and to prepare the LSC–Online program to achieve the stated course development goals, the associate vice chancellor for LSC–Online developed and proposed an action plan for the first year of operations (FY2009). The *Lone Star College–Online 2008-2009 Action Plan* (Durham, W., 2008) focuses on three themes: course quality, retention, and accountability. The main action items of the three themes are summarized below.

*Course Quality.* Action plan items for course quality include key aspects of developing and delivering a course, such as formulating a uniform course design, using a rubric to guide design, mapping outcomes to objectives, assessing the course, and articulating faculty contractual expectations and certification requirements.

*Uniform Course Design.* A uniform course design will be developed with input from instructional designers and program faculty. The design will consist of common components, such as:

- introduction to the course;
- clarification of student and faculty expectations;
- objectives;
- syllabus;
- class policies and procedures;
- schedule of events and due dates;
- resources;
- calendar;
- where to get help;
- ADA compliance;
- lessons that meet various learning styles;
- faculty resource file and content repository.

*Course and Program Design Rubric.* Lone Star College–Online courses will continue the LSC tradition of emphasizing student engagement in course design. The Quality Matters™ rubric will be used to support peer review and evaluation of course design. The tool will be purchased during the Fall 2008 semester and training will be scheduled.

*Map Learning Outcomes.* During course development, a methodology will be established to map each lesson to course outcomes and each course outcome to a programmatic outcome.

*Full Circle Course Assessment.* To facilitate ongoing course quality improvements, course evaluation instruments will be developed and administered. The entire course design team will review distance learning course evaluations.

*Faculty Distance Learning Contract.* Minimum contractual expectations will be established for instructors teaching a fully online course, emphasizing the role of faculty in creating a vibrant and engaging learning community. The expectations can include course related responsibilities as well as required training and certification.

*Faculty Certification.* The current distance learning faculty certification will be updated to reduce the focus on how to use tools for content placement and direct the emphasis more on pedagogy and leading the online learning environment. (adapted from Durham, W., 2008)

***Retention.*** The action plan focuses on developing various resources and processes to address retention, such as developing online student and faculty resources, articulating student and faculty expectations, addressing student retention check points, providing student assistance, and implementing re-enrollment processes.

*Online Student Resources Site.* The online student resources web site will be developed to include the following components:

- online orientation for distance learning courses and technologies;
- help desk for technical and curriculum issues;
- tip sheets for using the course management system;
- distance learning policies and procedures;
- faculty expectations of students;
- ADA compliance tutorials;
- testing procedures;
- material distribution;
- study skills;
- understanding individual learning styles;

- advising;
- financial aid;
- library resources;
- job placement;
- frequently asked questions (FAQ).

*Online Faculty Resources Site.* The online faculty resources web site will be developed to include the following elements:

- research on best practices;
- course design strategies and standards;
- course development and implementation schedule;
- academic advising sources and contact information;
- training and certification requirements and resources;
- techniques for assessing learning and technical skills;
- graphic and learning object organizers;
- tips and showcase of effective use of multimedia and learning objects;
- guidelines for copyright and use of print materials;
- help desk for technical and curriculum issues;
- top 40 frequently asked questions (FAQ).

*Faculty Expectations.* The role of students and the expectations that faculty have for their participation will be defined and articulated in each course. Examples include: amount of time each week devoted to study, time spent each week engaged in online course activities, number of required substantive responses to course activities, timely acquisition of course materials, etc.

*Student Expectations.* The role of faculty and the expectations that students have for their leadership in the course will be defined in each



course. Examples include: defining what constitutes a substantive response, answering emails and discussion posts within a prescribed time period, providing feedback on assignments, monitoring and guiding discussion boards, etc.

*Retention Check Points.* To assist in retaining students, the LSC–Online program will establish a method for monitoring student inactivity in courses and providing alerts so that student support staff can follow up with students. Retention checkpoints will be established as triggers for proactive contacts with students who appear to be struggling. For example, at the seventh class day during the beginning of each semester a list will be generated of students who have not yet participated in course activities. The LSC–Online staff will email and call these students to provide assistance and assist them, if possible, in getting on track with the course.

*LSC–Online Call Center.* The help desk for online and telephone assistance will be modified to serve as a call center for proactive student interactions designed to solicit feedback, provide information, and maintain a link with students during the semester. Outbound emails and phone calls will be scheduled at various times during the semester to: a) conduct assessments on current course activities, b) survey students on future distance learning course or degree needs and interests, and c) provide a list of course offerings for the next semester and a registration schedule.

*Personalized Messaging and Re-enrollment.* The call center will establish a method for sending personalized emails to each student three times during the semester. The messages serve as a positive reinforcement for the students and as a method of strengthening the LSC–Online brand. The first message will be sent at the start of each semester congratulating each student on entering the online course. It will include information to reinforce where and how the student can receive assistance. The second email later in the semester will include a positive message about the course in which the student is enrolled and will include information concerning upcoming registration timelines. The third message, sent toward the end of the semester, will be signed by the dean over the curriculum area of the student’s course. The letter will congratulate the student on a positive semester, provide information concerning online courses offered in that specific academic area during the upcoming semester, and include an active link to the online registration site. (adapted from Durham, W., 2008)

**Accountability.** The action plan proposes the establishment of a single point of accountability for the success of a distance learning program in a multi-college system (Durham, W., 2008). As part of the accountability process for the action plan and the LSC–Online initiative, the AVC will monitor the status of the action plan and the student success metrics and report that information monthly to the chancellor and executive council. General status reports and updates will also be shared via a monthly district-wide newsletter.

In summary, the *Lone Star College–Online 2008-2009 Action Plan* (Durham, W., 2008) focuses on three themes: course quality, retention, and accountability. The action plan items for FY2009 represent the chosen strategy to achieve programmatic success for the first year of the LSC–Online program. Success for LSC–Online will be based on improving student success as measured by student completion, student retention, and student satisfaction. Successful execution of the FY2009 action plan objectives should organizationally prepare the LSC–Online program for the next stage of implementation focused on the development of 30 courses.

### **Lone Star College–Online Fiscal Plan**

**Budget.** The Lone Star College System’s FY2009 budget supports the action plan for LSC–Online’s first year of operations. In addition to the recently approved distance learning fee, the board approved a \$1.75 million Lone Star College–Online initiative within the FY2009 budget. The budget initiative will fund the distance learning programmatic improvements and increased support for faculty and students that will be necessary to accomplish the action plan.

**Staffing.** The FY2009 distance learning budgetary initiative more than doubles the prior eCampus staffing level. For FY2009, Lone Star College–Online employs twenty-two full-time and four part-time staff members, representing an addition of

thirteen new full-time support staff and managers. With the additional staff, the LSC–Online organization consists of the following positions:

- Associate Vice Chancellor for LSC–Online
  - Administrative Assistant
- Senior Online Director
  - Staff Coordinator
- Director of Course Development
  - Instructional Designer (five)
- Director of Instructional Technology
  - Instructional Technologist (six)
  - Web Designer
- Director of Engagement
  - Customer Relationship Manager
  - Part time Call Center Specialist (four)
- Institutional Research Manager
- Business Manager

***Facilities.*** To accommodate workspace for the larger LSC–Online team, the staff and operations were moved in Fall 2008 into temporary rented office quarters erected adjacent to the Central Services and Training Center (CSTC). The recently passed bond referendum provides funds for expansion and remodeling of previously leased spaces at the CSTC campus. Current plans call for the LSC–Online staff to move into remodeled space when it is ready for occupancy.

## **Summary**

The Lone Star College System leadership has quickly responded to the task force recommendations and feedback. A new distance learning fee was added to create a

funding instrument responsive to growth. An associate vice chancellor for the newly designated LSC–Online program has been hired. An action plan for FY2009 has been proposed and approved. A fiscal plan for FY2009 has been implemented that includes a \$1.75 million budget initiative, thirteen additional LSC–Online staff, and a facilities plan.

## **ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION: PHASE II**

Analysis and interpretation in this phase of the study begins with a review of the prior distance learning documents and the literature, followed by a review of the feedback received from the proposal, and concluding with a review of the institutional response and actions implemented thus far.

### **Prior LSCS Documents and the Literature**

Table 5.2 (next page) summarizes administrative conditions and services suggested in current and prior LSCS distance learning documents and the literature. Because the 2001 report is an update to the 2000 distance learning plan, the items for the two documents are combined in the 2001 column. Literature sources are abbreviated in the chart, with complete source information included in the table notes.

Table 5.2

*Trends in Administrative Conditions and Services Suggested in LSCS Distance Learning Documents and the Literature*

Suggested Administrative Conditions and Services	LSCS Sources and Literature				
	1996	1999	2001	2008	Lit.
<i>Governance and Planning</i>					c, g
Permanent funding in budget	•	•	•	•	a, f, k
Develop financial model for sustainability		•	•	•	a, b, f, i, k
Funding growth via distance learning fee				•	f, g, i
Collaborative service model		•	•	•	g
Comprehensive annual review and evaluation of the program and services	•	•	•	•	b, d, e, g, k
Supported by coordination team	•	•	•		g
Need leadership for program	•	•	•	•	i
Accountability by committee		•	•	•	
Advisory committee	•		•	•	
Oversight committee		•	•	•	
Steering committee				•	
Annual distance learning plan		•	•	•	c, f, g, h, i
Student driven planning		•	•	•	g
Goals established for the program			•	•	g, i

*(table continues)*

Suggested Administrative Conditions and Services	LSCS Sources and Literature				
	1996	1999	2001	2008	Lit.
<i>Technology Infrastructure</i>					a, b
Central coordination of technology		•	•	•	e, g, h
Infrastructure capacity			•		a, f, h
Stable infrastructure				•	e, f, i
Stable course management system				•	e, f, h, i
Virtual online campus with all services			•	•	
Technology plan				•	a, e
District-wide standards for technology			•	•	b
Support roles defined for distance learning, district IT, and college IT			•	•	g, h
<i>Support Services for Students</i>					a, b, g, i, j
Distance learning web page		•			
Distance learning comprehensive web site			•	•	f
Branded distance learning web site			•	•	
Student resources web site			•	•	k
Student services accessible via distance:					a, c, d, f, i, k
- admission application			•		

(table continues)

Suggested Administrative Conditions and Services	LSCS Sources and Literature				
	1996	1999	2001	2008	Lit.
- advising	•	•	•	•	b
- student readiness instrument			•	•	e, h, I, k
- restrict distance learning enrollments based on measured risk factors				•	
- individualized student academic plan			•		
- registration		•	•	•	h
- financial aid				•	I, k
- orientation	•	•	•	•	b, d, e, h
- counseling		•	•	•	b
- testing		•	•	•	
- library services and resources		•	•	•	a, b, c, i
- tutoring			•	•	b
- student development seminars & programs			•		
- online learning center: tutoring, developmental studies curriculum, writing lab, math lab, reading lab			•		
- bookstore services			•	•	
- student clubs				•	

*(table continues)*

Suggested Administrative Conditions and Services	LSCS Sources and Literature				
	1996	1999	2001	2008	Lit.
- student activities				•	
- technology training/orientation	•	•	•	•	a, b, c, e, h, k
- technical support, help desk	•	•	•	•	a, b, e, f, h, i
Assess effectiveness of student services			•	•	b, d, g, k
<i>Curriculum and Design</i>					
Develop courses to support distance learning certificates and degrees	•	•	•	•	a, b, c, f
Develop brand for distance learning courses			•	•	
Target top-enrollment courses for development				•	
Course promotes student interaction and engagement	•	•	•	•	b, e, h, i
Establish standards and criteria for course development, delivery, and evaluation	•	•	•	•	e, h, i
Establish course revision/review cycle			•	•	e, h, f
Course development team approach, with instructional designer, librarian, etc.	•	•	•	•	e, f, g, h
Consistent course design/framework for all distance learning courses			•	•	h

(table continues)



Suggested Administrative Conditions and Services	LSCS Sources and Literature				
	1996	1999	2001	2008	Lit.
Master course concept with core content, methods, activities, and flexibility for faculty options			•	•	f, h
Course learning object repository for faculty options			•	•	h
Peer review of courses (Quality Matters™)				•	g, h
Research design and instructional methodologies to improve student success	•	•	•	•	b, d, e, g, k
Course evaluations based on standards and learning outcomes	•	•	•	•	a, e, f, i, k
Full-circle course evaluations including design team	•		•	•	a, e, h, i, k
Course quality metrics:					
- student success indicators	•		•	•	e, f, i, k
- student retention	•			•	f, k
- student satisfaction	•				d, f, k
Establish faculty expectations				•	e, g
Establish student expectations				•	e

*(table continues)*

Suggested Administrative Conditions and Services	LSCS Sources and Literature				
	1996	1999	2001	2008	Lit.
<i>Faculty Issues</i>					
Faculty participation in distance learning:					
- invite/encourage to participate	•				i
- provide incentives for participation		•	•		c, e, i
- utilize faculty selection process			•	•	h
- develop faculty recruitment plan				•	
Faculty preparation:					
- Distance learning orientation	•				c, e
- Distance learning training	•	•	•	•	c, e, f, k
- Distance learning certification			•	•	
- Distance learning faculty expectations				•	e, g
Faculty development:					a, b
- Forums to discuss methods that improve instruction, student retention and success	•		•		d, e, g, h
- faculty development conference each semester for sharing effective practices, etc.			•		d, e, g, h
- ‘technology fellows’ faculty mentors			•		e, f

(table continues)

Suggested Administrative Conditions and Services	LSCS Sources and Literature				
	1996	1999	2001	2008	Lit.
Faculty evaluation:					
- Evaluate faculty and student performance	•	•	•	•	a, b, f, g, k
- Distance learning certification for instructional supervisors			•		
Faculty resources web site			•	•	
Faculty services accessible via distance:					c, h, j, k
- technical support, help desk	•	•	•	•	e, h, i
- material duplication/distribution	•	•	•		
- coordination for testing			•	•	
- frequently asked questions (FAQ)			•		
- orientation			•		
- training materials and resources			•	•	
- certification program			•	•	
- software guides			•		
- sample course environments			•		
- showcase of effective practices			•		
- calendar of events			•		

*(table continues)*

Suggested Administrative Conditions and Services	LSCS Sources and Literature				
	1996	1999	2001	2008	Lit.
<i>Marketing and Branding</i>					b, f
Develop and implement a marketing plan	•	•	•		
Market research		•	•	•	f, g
Develop target marketing strategies		•	•	•	
Market courses via the distance learning web site		•	•		f
Faculty home pages to market courses		•	•		
Create standard look and feel in all courses			•	•	h
Develop brand for distance learning program and courseware			•	•	
License branded courseware to other colleges			•		

*Note.* Because the 2001 document is an update to the 2000 document, the two are represented in the 2001 column. Literature sources are abbreviated as single characters in the chart above.

<sup>a</sup>(American Council on Education, 1996). <sup>b</sup>(American Distance Education Consortium, 2002). <sup>c</sup>(Levy, S., 2003). <sup>d</sup>(Lorenzo, G. & Moore, J.C., 2002; Moore, J.C., 2002, 2005, 2008; The Sloan Consortium, 2002). <sup>e</sup>(Merisotis, J.P. & Phipps, R.A., 2000). <sup>f</sup>(Olliver, J., 2004). <sup>g</sup>(Prester, G.E. & Moller, L.A., 2001). <sup>h</sup>(Ragan, L.C. & Terheggen, S.L., 2003). <sup>i</sup>(Schauer, J., Rockwell, S.K., Fritz, S.M., & Marx, D.B., 2005). <sup>j</sup>(Southern Regional Education Board, 2004). <sup>k</sup>(Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications, 1999).

When comparing trends in the current and previous distance learning documents with the literature, a couple of insights come to light. The faculty, staff, and leadership of the college district are to be commended for their vision and insight. As early as 1996, college leaders have been recommending the implementation of conditions, practices, and

services that are also suggested in the literature. Additional refinements to practice, supported by the literature, have been advocated in subsequent proposals. In effect, the table above offers an illustration of several cycles of practical action research within the Lone Star College System. Given that subsequent proposals continued to offer similar recommendations, one can conclude that the organization was not successfully addressing the recommendations.

It is also interesting to note that none of the literature reviewed contained supporting recommendations for leading or managing distance learning by committee.

### **Feedback from Benchmark Distance Learning Programs**

In reviewing the comments from the external distance learning practitioners, several insights resonated for the researcher as significant concepts to consider when implementing the LSCS distance learning program.

- The proposed name for the LSCS distance learning program, eCollege, might be a problem if it is already in use commercially. The new AVC for LSC–Online appears to have noticed this as well, since the proposed ‘eCollege’ name was not ultimately selected.
- Funding is an important issue that must be stable and must accommodate programmatic growth and scalability of processes and services. The board of trustees has addressed this for FY2009.
- The proposal involves a significant culture change at the institution. This needs further review.
- Leaders of the Lone Star College System may need to define the goals and mission for LSC–Online. In the past, the purpose of the LSCS distance learning program has been to serve the needs of the other campuses. Is it time to consider a

- mission and organizational goals for LSC–Online that are defined directly by the distance learning environment and market?
- Specific objectives and metrics need to be identified for the general goals of quality, consistency, and scalability in the distance learning program, so that leaders can assess when the goals are achieved. The new AVC for LSC–Online has proposed an action plan for FY2009 with specific objectives and metrics and a reporting process.
  - Fostering collaboration and cooperation is a valid goal for a multi-college district but the devil remains in the details. The LSCS funding model for distance learning needs to provide a win/win so that the individual colleges have incentives and benefits for participating in the distance learning program and the distance learning program also has resources and sanction to advance its mission and goals.
  - Institutional leaders need to define the distance learning capacity they are willing to sustain and support in terms of the number of distance learning courses, certificates, and degrees offered and the resources necessary to develop and maintain them. This has been partially addressed by the course development initiative announced by the AVC for LSC–Online. An established mission will provide guidance in defining the certificates and degrees the program will sustain.

### **Feedback from Consultants**

In reviewing the comments from the consultants, additional insights emerged as significant concepts for consideration when planning and implementing the distance learning program.

### ***Market-driven Perspective***

The insights from the consultants suggest that the college system leaders could include an additional perspective when reviewing the recommendations for the LSCS distance learning program. To meet current and future distance learning student needs, the administrative conditions and services of the LSCS distance-learning program should address not only the original issues that emerged for the task force—consistency, quality, and scalability—but also the ability of the institution to be efficient and responsive to distance learning students and market needs or trends.

### ***Implementation***

Suggestions from the consultants regarding the implementation of the distance learning program provide several insights that should be considered when responding to the recommendations of the distance learning task force proposal.

*Capacity for Course Development.* Feedback from benchmark college practitioners provided the insight that the institution needs to define the organizational capacity it is willing to sustain and support in terms of the number of distance learning courses and the resources necessary to develop and maintain them. Feedback from the consultants provides a useful suggestion for implementation of this concept—focus course development on the courses that represent 70 percent of the distance learning enrollment. The LSCS distance learning program should study enrollment data to identify the courses that comprise a high percentage of distance learning enrollments. College leaders should then determine if they are willing to provide the resources necessary to sustain development and maintenance of those courses. Hopefully LSCS leaders will determine that it is a manageable number of courses, perhaps similar to the 36 courses that one of the benchmark colleges identified for development and continual updating.

*Proactive Communications.* The suggestion that the current distance learning help desk should be transformed to a broader call center service is a useful way to proactively obtain feedback on the program, provide pre-advising, and support marketing and branding opportunities. Using the same employees also helps develop a stronger relationship with the students that are served.

*Course Quality.* For implementing the course design process, the idea of mapping outcomes to course objectives and activities is a sound approach to improve course quality and effectiveness. It can also support efforts to align curriculum across courses in programs, certificates, and degrees. Mapping outcomes during distance learning course design would be a timely addition to LSCS distance learning practice. The process would support the college in addressing recent changes in 2008 to the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) accreditation guidelines requiring institutions to identify and assess achievement of student learning outcomes and general education competencies (The Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, 2008).

The concept of articulating specific faculty expectations in distance learning courses was mentioned in the proposal and feedback from consultants expanded on this idea. Written faculty expectations represent a new administrative element that could support achieving more consistent course delivery, but it also will likely require a cultural change. If implemented as a written guideline or within a distance learning teaching contract that requires adherence to distance learning faculty expectations, the faculty may interpret this procedure as a limitation on academic freedom. But such a guideline would not represent a new requirement upon faculty and hopefully will not be interpreted as a limitation. Faculty expectations have long existed for traditional course assignments. For



example, faculty are expected to prepare their lectures and class activities, meet all of their class sessions at the prescribed times and location, provide office hours, etc.

*Governance.* Instituting more central control is a reasonable strategy to achieve tighter organizational accountability for the success of the distance learning program (Olliver, J., 2004). The approach provides better assurance that the program achieves the stated goal of improving the college district's ability to meet current and future distance learning student needs. Implementing a single point of accountability would require college leaders to re-think the governance and planning sections of the proposal, streamline the suggested governance and decision-making processes, maintain strong communication processes, and empower the AVC for LSC–Online to do what is necessary to achieve agreed-upon distance learning goals and objectives.

Thus, accountability must be accompanied by empowerment. Measuring distance learning effectiveness and implementing changes at LSC–Online to improve courses and services requires empowering the AVC to be able to make and execute decisions, take action, and allocate or realign resources to achieve objectives, etc.

A single point of accountability therefore creates an empowered distance learning program, which also represents a cultural shift for the college district. The LSCS culture has historically embraced the concept of collaboration and committee decisions. This recent task force proposal and proposals from prior years have consistently championed the concept of collaborative processes as a means for the multi-college district to deliver distance learning more efficiently while also allowing individual colleges to retain distance learning enrollments and utilize the district's most talented faculty from all college locations. So the challenge will be to implement an administrative model that establishes the AVC for LSC–Online as the single point of accountability, empowers LSC–Online to achieve objectives, and also provides for collaboration, communication,

feedback, etc. The ideal implementation of the suggested single point of accountability should also maintain incentives for individual campuses to participate in the distance learning program even if decision-making and accountability are centralized.

### **LSC–Online Implementation**

A review of the institutional responses thus far suggests that the LSCS chancellor has established a two-phased organizational strategy for building the LSC–Online brand and program. The strategy addresses the four concerns expressed by the task force and the consultants—consistency, quality, scalability, and market responsiveness.

The first phase uses the action plan to focus on the implementation of procedures, services, and resources that provide organizational capacity to secure consistent quality for the LSC–Online faculty and student experience.

The second phase of implementation will provide organizational scalability and responsiveness to distance learning market needs through the creation of a course development process designed to establish and maintain a portfolio of distance learning offerings. To create the highest initial impact on scalability and to build the LSC–Online brand, the AVC for LSC–Online will develop a consistent quality and brand design for the top high-enrollment online courses representing 70 percent of LSCS distance learning enrollments. Initial course development efforts will focus specifically on 30 distance learning courses.

The implementation strategy also appears to be responsive to feedback received from the benchmark distance learning practitioners. Through the action plan and the approved FY2009 budget, the strategy addresses suggestions regarding necessary funding, a reconsideration of the program’s brand name, establishment of objectives and metrics, and identification of organizational capacity for developing and maintaining courses.

Two items of feedback from the benchmark distance learning practitioners remain worthy of attention as the college district moves forward with implementation of the LSC–Online program: a) establishing a mission and goals, and b) preserving incentives for campus participation.

*Mission.* The LSC–Online program should have an approved mission and goals that define the focus and intended distance learning market(s). While improving current and future distance learning student success remains the broad goal for LSC–Online, the college system needs to define *which* distance learning students will be served. For example, will LSC–Online be marketed only in the local college service area? Will it be marketed statewide or nationwide? If so, what is the timeline for that strategy? Do college leaders intend to create international distance learning programs at some point in the future? Will LSC–Online be marketed to military personnel throughout the world? Will LSC–Online serve as a vehicle to expand customized corporate training opportunities? An approved mission and goals will provide guidance for long-term strategies and annual programmatic planning and objectives. A formal statement of mission and goals will be especially useful when the LSC–Online course development process is implemented as a part of the operational capacity of the program.

*Incentives.* To maintain involvement of full time faculty in distance learning, college district leaders will need to preserve incentives for campus participation in the distance learning program as decision-making and accountability for LSC–Online are centralized. This will require modifications to the recommended governance model to ensure that stakeholders remain engaged in contributing to the success of the program while also permitting scalability and responsiveness to market needs.

## **RESEARCHER CONCLUSIONS**

From a review of prior distance learning documents and the literature, feedback on the task force proposal, and the institutional response and action items, three insights require discussion. This researcher proposes conclusions regarding the following questions.

- What organizational model will achieve the balance in governance that provides a single point of accountability and empowerment, collaboration with the colleges, incentives for college participation, and an articulated mission and goals that are driven by the distance learning market?
- Why was the institution unsuccessful in addressing prior recommendations? What catalytic conditions are needed to produce a different result?
- How can the organization address the cultural changes necessary? How will college leaders transform the culture to achieve distance learning success?

## **ORGANIZATIONAL MODEL FOR THE DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAM**

An organizational model is needed that sustains the constant evolution and improvement of administrative conditions and services to address the broad issues identified by the task force and the consultants: consistency, quality, scalability, and market responsiveness. The model should empower a single point of accountability to address and improve distance learning student success. The model should also promote the creation of goals and a strategic plan that are responsive to the needs of distance learning students. Finally, the model should be strategic in providing economic incentives to ensure that the district's finest talent and resources are utilized in providing the best distance learning experience possible for LSCS students.

The consultants suggested the implementation of the distance learning program should include a governance model that provides more central control of key processes that provide consistency, quality, scalability, and responsiveness. The LSC–Online FY2009 action plan approved by the executive council and funded by the LSCS Board of Trustees establishes the AVC for LSC–Online as the single point of accountability.

So the challenge will be to implement an organizational governance model that establishes the AVC for LSC–Online as the single point of accountability, empowers LSC–Online to define and achieve objectives, and provides for collaboration, communication, feedback, and participation with campus stakeholders. The ideal model should provide incentives for campuses to participate in the distance learning program even as decision-making and accountability are centralized. This appears to have been difficult to accomplish in the past at the Lone Star College System and at the benchmark colleges.

As the task force discussed insights from the meetings with practitioners of other distance learning programs, a trend emerged concerning the organizational models under which distance learning programs had been established in the benchmark multi-college districts.

Among the benchmark institutions, two organizational models surfaced for establishing a distance learning program in a multi-college district: a) the creation of a separate distance learning entity that functions as an autonomous institution with focused expertise, and b) the establishment of a collaborative distance learning service area that coordinates efforts among the multiple campuses and/or departments.

The task force members felt that each model had challenges. They observed that the autonomous distance learning colleges tended to be heavily supported by adjunct faculty and created internal competition for students among the campuses of a multi-

college district. The collaborative service area model tended to have a negative impact on consistency and quality of courses, and the effectiveness in planning and developing online courses, certificates, and degrees.

This has also been the experience at the Lone Star College System. Prior LSCS distance learning proposals suggest appropriate administrative conditions and services for distance learning but the collaborative service model within a historically de-centralized district governance model has not delivered the intended results. Yet, the alternative, an autonomous institutional model, has potentially devastating economic disadvantages to campuses that currently generate 30 or 40 percent of total enrollments via distance learning. A different model is needed.

This researcher proposes that a third model, an *insourcing* model, could be utilized in a multi-college district such as LSCS. The insourcing model represents a hybrid of the two models observed among the benchmark institutions that reduces the perceived challenges of the two models while aggregating the observed strengths of both.

Insourcing is defined as the “delegation of operations or jobs from production within a business to an internal (but 'stand-alone') entity that specializes in that operation. Insourcing is a business decision that is often made to maintain control of critical production or competencies” (Wikipedia, 2008b). In a multi-college district, the concept of insourcing the distance learning program involves centrally focusing distance learning talent and expertise for planning, instructional design, support services, training, assessment, course delivery, and other key operations while utilizing resources from the entire college district to support the distance learning program.

Table 5.3 (next page) includes a summary of the perceived strengths and challenges of the two observed models, as well as the anticipated strengths and challenges of the insourcing model.

Table 5.3

*Distance Learning Models in a Multi-college District*

Model	Strengths	Challenges
Collaborative Service Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Diversity and creativity of instructional approaches.</li> <li>- Promotes participation by full time faculty.</li> <li>- Colleges retain contact hour enrollments for internal funding allocations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Inconsistent student experience.</li> <li>- The distance learning department is not empowered to provide quality assurance.</li> <li>- Standards are advised, but are not required. Adherence to standards is not assured.</li> <li>- Full time faculty can design multiple versions of a course.</li> <li>- Limited planning for distance learning offerings.</li> <li>- Less efficient, with duplication of effort.</li> <li>- Accountability is difficult.</li> <li>- Scalability is limited.</li> </ul>

*(table continues)*

Model	Strengths	Challenges
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Responsiveness to market needs is slowed by the consensus building process.</li> </ul>
Autonomous College Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Consistent student experience.</li> <li>- Quality assurance.</li> <li>- Accountability.</li> <li>- Services provided by staff with distance learning focus and expertise.</li> <li>- Course and program development and planning is stronger, with design processes and teams.</li> <li>- Scalability.</li> <li>- Responsive to market needs, undeterred by the other campuses.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Very competitive with internal colleges.</li> <li>- Funding and growth occurs at the perceived expense of other colleges.</li> <li>- Tends to utilize an overwhelming majority of adjunct faculty.</li> <li>- Limited full time faculty participation and buy-in from other colleges.</li> <li>- Some models focused heavily on individualized, self-paced learning.</li> </ul>

*(table continues)*



Model	Strengths	Challenges
Insourcing Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Consistent student experience.</li> <li>- Quality assurance.</li> <li>- Diversity of approaches can be supported via design process and mapping of outcomes.</li> <li>- Course and program development and planning is stronger, with design processes and teams.</li> <li>- Services provided by staff with distance learning focus and expertise.</li> <li>- Scalability.</li> <li>- Flexible and responsive to market needs.</li> <li>- Colleges retain contact hour enrollments for internal funding allocations.</li> <li>- Encourages participation by full time faculty.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Major cultural changes will be required!</li> <li>- LSC–Online could still be viewed as a college competitor if the funding formula creates disincentives.</li> <li>- Requires strong institutional research and supporting business intelligence tools to create and monitor measurable and equitable quality criteria used to establish eligibility for campus participation.</li> <li>- The model could be destabilizing under the wrong leadership.</li> </ul>

*(table continues)*

Model	Strengths	Challenges
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Accountability.</li> <li>- Utilizes standard district funding allocation model – no secondary calculation is required.</li> </ul>	

Source: (Carstens, D.R., 2008b)

Under the insourcing model, responsibility for the long-term goals and strategic planning for distance learning is passed from the colleges to the AVC for LSC–Online, but through the normal district-wide governance and decision-making process, LSC–Online goals must align within the overall mission and strategic plan of the college system and should not conflict with the campus goals.

The insourcing model establishes empowerment and a single point of accountability for consistency, quality, scalability, and market responsiveness of distance learning while prioritizing the acquisition of resources and capacity through internal sources when available, followed by external options if internal resources are unavailable. Therefore, if colleges or departments have limited resources to participate in supporting distance learning, the insourcing model nevertheless empowers the LSC–Online operation to achieve the distance learning course and degree objectives and utilize faculty from other external sources to deliver the curriculum if LSCS faculty are unavailable.

Thus, the campus leaders have the “right of first refusal” to participate and provide faculty in support of the distance learning program but they no longer have

complete control to set its direction. Instead, the insourcing model allows the LSC–Online leaders to establish organizational goals and strategic plans that are defined directly by the distance learning environment and market.

### **Planning**

The insourcing model would enhance the ability for LSC–Online to respond to market needs. Therefore the strategic planning process may benefit from a steering committee that also includes representatives from the major customer sectors potentially served by the distance learning program, such as the corporate college or local school districts. Their input could provide long-term insights for the eventual extension of the LSC–Online brand beyond credit programs into new distance learning markets such as customized corporate training, non-credit programs, P-16 opportunities, international programs, or the military market.

There are potential challenges for the insourcing model as noted above in Table 5.3.

### **Culture**

The cultural changes underlying a shift toward performance metrics would certainly require attention from college leaders. Fortunately, the chancellor has already begun to shift the entire college district culture toward transparency concerning its strengths and challenges, toward an environment of metrics and performance that are reported regularly to the community. This cultural shift will provide underlying organizational support for the cultural adaptations that a distance learning insourcing model would require at LSCS. Likewise, instituting central control and accountability would require a change in thinking at the campuses. But again, several other administrative functions have been shifted toward central control during the first year of

the new chancellor's tenure, so the college organization is more prepared for this aspect of insourcing than it would have been in prior years.

### **Metrics**

Related to the cultural change toward transparency, accountability and performance criteria, the insourcing model requires metrics for real-time status and trends. A significant investment in talent and technology resources would be required to develop institutional research and business intelligence tools that create and monitor the quality and performance indicators that will be critical for measuring the effectiveness of many of the suggested LSC–Online action items and services.

### **Funding Implications**

The insourcing model should not require the establishment of a special funding formula to support the LSC–Online initiative. It should function seamlessly under the established district funding allocation model for the campuses, avoiding a secondary distribution of funds based on distance learning contact hours or head count or student geographic data such as zip codes. Likewise, the model does not require a separate college entity that would create internal competition and siphon enrollments and associated dollars away from the existing campuses.

Instead, the insourcing model fits into the established funding formula criteria for allocating dollars to campuses (regardless of the criteria). The essential difference with insourcing is that LSC–Online is established as the point of accountability and therefore determines eligibility for participation in distance learning based on key student success and performance indicators that address quality and efficiency. Geographic proximity of campuses to students would no longer be an inherent qualification for claiming

‘ownership’ of distance learning contact hours generated by students enrolling in distance learning courses.

It is not a new concept at the college district to define participation in distance learning based on adherence to key success or performance indicators. The principle was introduced and approved in the NHMCCD 1999 and 2000 distance learning proposals (Carstens, D.R., 2000; Stegall, L., 1999). The innovation added to the insourcing model is that LSC–Online is responsible for establishing and achieving market-driven goals (not college goals), and faculty eligibility for participation in the program would be centrally determined by LSC–Online (not the colleges) using consistent and measurable performance criteria.

In summary, the insourcing organizational model sustains the continual improvement of administrative conditions and services to address the broad issues identified by the task force and the consultants: consistency, quality, scalability, and market responsiveness. The model empowers a single point of accountability to address and improve distance learning student success. The model also promotes the creation of goals and a strategic plan that are responsive to the needs of distance learning students. Finally, the model strategically provides economic incentives to ensure that the district’s finest talent and resources are utilized in providing the best distance learning experience possible for LSCS students.

## **CATALYTIC ADMINISTRATIVE CONDITIONS**

Progress in LSCS distance learning operations has occurred since the distribution of the 1996 proposal. With each subsequent proposal, changes in the program have moved LSCS distance learning to another level, new processes have been implemented, more faculty have been trained, and enrollments have increased. But the essential quality

measure of the program, success of distance learning students, has not improved. Student success in LSCS distance learning courses remains lower than the success observed in traditional courses. In fact, the gap between distance learning student success and student success for traditional courses has actually widened slightly since 2003 (Carstens, D.R., 2008a).

It is interesting to note the consistency of the proposal recommendations listed in Table 5.2. Despite the fact that college leaders have consistently proposed specific administrative conditions and services that the literature also suggests should be included in effective distance learning programs, the college system has struggled to implement the proposed actions effectively.

It has been said by many, “if you keep doing what you’re doing, you’ll keep getting what you’re getting.” Thus, in 2008, thirteen years after the initial proposal had been presented, the Lone Star College System still lacks an effective distance learning program that supports student success through consistency, quality, scalability, and market responsiveness.

It is more fascinating to consider what is *not* listed in Table 5.2. The current situation at LSCS suggests that the college district’s prior well-intended efforts to develop a quality distance learning program have addressed several benchmark effective processes but have not established other administrative conditions that, if present, would have produced better results. Those conditions are missing from Table 5.2 and do not appear in the distance learning literature.

What are the missing administrative conditions or services? What absent conditions have prevented the establishment of an effective distance learning program that produces student success with quality and consistency? What administrative

conditions or services are missing from Table 5.2 that, if included now in the organization, would make the difference?

Are the previously missing administrative conditions or services now included in the current implementation and action items? After several prior programmatic attempts, does the current institutional response and action plan have the potential to succeed in establishing an effective distance learning program that improves the college's ability to meet current and future distance learning needs? The actual success of the program will be measurable in a few years as the courses and services are fully developed. But is there reason to believe that the potential exists for success? This researcher believes that the potential is there, but success is not guaranteed.

This researcher has reviewed years of personal professional experience with six higher education distance learning initiatives, prior LSCS proposals and feedback from the current proposal, the related literature, and the recent institutional response and actions. The conclusion from these reviews is that one or more administrative conditions have been missing in the prior proposals and/or during prior implementations of distance learning at LSCS. When all conditions are present, they form the catalyst for aligning practice with values and goals. When one or more are absent, organizational success becomes increasingly more difficult to achieve.

The catalytic administrative conditions that should also be established in a multi-college district-wide distance learning program to improve student success are:

- a mission and goals (market driven);
- leadership;
- accountability;
- resource capacity.

These catalytic conditions are foundational for organizational success. When combined with the effective practices suggested in the proposals and literature, the LSC–Online program should have greater potential for success. Just imagine the opposite... what can any organization accomplish with no mission, no leadership, no accountability, and no resources?

### **Mission and Goals**

Successful organizations have goals that are widely understood (Deal, T.E. & Kennedy, A.A., 1982). LSC–Online needs to articulate a mission and goals that are steered by the distance learning market. The mission and goals should be known across the organization. They provide focus for annual planning and allocation of efforts and resources that move the program toward achieving student success with consistency, quality, scalability, and market responsiveness.

Although the course development initiative and specific action items have been put into operation, the implementation process has not yet included the articulation of a clear mission and goals for LSC–Online. If adopted by the LSCS chancellor, the proposed insourcing organizational model creates a framework for establishing a mission and goals.

### **Leadership**

Leadership provides vision. Leadership instills passion. Leadership is the ability to “influence the values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of others by working with and through them in order to accomplish the college’s mission and purpose” (Roueche, J., Baker, G., & Rose, R., 1989, p. 11).

Leadership has been addressed by the proposal and the institutional response. A leadership position has been established for the LSC–Online distance learning effort at an



appropriate administrative level in the organization. The person hired as the associate vice chancellor for LSC–Online is now challenged to step into a strong leadership role to guide the distance learning program with passion and energy. The proposed insourcing organizational model provides a framework for establishing leadership within the college district.

### **Accountability**

Prior iterations of the distance learning program relied heavily on collaboration for decisions and actions. With a heavy reliance on committee decisions, this model provided little to no accountability for the outcomes or solutions for improvement. Without empowerment, accountability is nothing more than a mechanism for blame. True accountability must be placed upon the LSC–Online staff and leader, along with the empowerment necessary to address the responsibilities given.

The institutional response has provided for a single point of accountability via the AVC for LSC–Online. The proposed insourcing organizational model provides a context for collaboration and incentives for college participation while maintaining accountability.

### **Resource Capacity**

Like any other organization, the LSC–Online program requires resources to accomplish program objectives. With inconsistent leadership articulating the needs of the prior distance learning programs and with no leaders at higher levels to serve as champions for the initiative, the prior distance learning staff labored for years with limited resources that did not grow substantially even as student enrollments increased dramatically. The LSC–Online will experience the same results as prior distance learning programs if sufficient resource capacity is not provided.

The task force proposal recommended the addition of more resources than were actually allocated, but the distance learning budget approved by the board of trustees is larger than it has ever been. The FY2009 budget has provided a significant boost to the prior organizational capacity, more than doubling the full time staff available to support students and faculty and providing additional funds to implement the proposed action items. The distance learning fee provides a funding vehicle that boosts resource capacity as demand for services increases.

With three of the four catalytic conditions present, this researcher believes that the current implementation of distance learning at LSCS has the potential to succeed. The college system leaders are encouraged to formulate a shared vision for the LSC–Online program so that resources and efforts can be steadily and systematically leveraged in achieving the ultimate goal of consistent distance learning student success that is scalable and establishing a program that is responsive to student needs.

When the catalysts are combined with the recommended benchmark effective practices, the potential exists for administrative conditions and services to converge in a perfect storm to establish an effective distance learning program that can be a model for other multi-college districts.

## **CULTURE**

There are several aspects of the proposal and institutional response that require cultural changes to implement. The current changes to the program in accountability and empowerment, written expectations for faculty, course development and peer review process, course design standards, common course framework, student assessments, certification, and faculty selection by performance metrics are a few examples representing a cultural impact. Key administrative conditions similar to some of these

have been accepted in prior proposals but were not implemented. The culture at the time would not embrace them and the leadership decided not to steer the culture to do so.

Therefore, to establish an effective distance learning program LSCS leaders and the LSC–Online staff and leadership should focus beyond recommended modifications to administrative conditions such as support services or operational procedures. They should also diminish the cultural aspects of the organization that impede distance learning student progress and nurture those elements of the culture that promote student success.

Culture surfaces as a key administrative or organizational condition for establishing an effective program that produces distance learning student success. Alfred (1998) explains that culture is a strategic weapon. It should not be ignored as part of an overall strategy for the distance learning program to become a high performing organization. To achieve great results for distance learning students, the main agenda should include changing the culture rather than focusing only on techniques (Fullan, M.G. & Stiegelbauer, S., 1991).

An effective distance learning organization whose staff and faculty are driven to achieve student success requires “a culture of evidence, a culture of inquiry, a culture of excellence, a culture of discipline” (Carstens, D.R., 2007b, p. 30). Elements of the institutional response and action plan are moving the culture this direction, with reliance on standards and metrics that require a willingness to inquire, to be accountable, and to improve. Proper leadership will be key in this type of cultural transition.

To build a great distance learning organization with a disciplined culture, Collins (2005) explains that the process of organizational transformation requires four stages: disciplined people, disciplined thought, disciplined actions, and building greatness to last.

Thus, an initial leadership task for the new AVC for LSC–Online is determining “who”... then “what” (Collins, J.C., 2001). Hiring disciplined staff will be the most

important job. Finding, developing, and retaining disciplined faculty will be essential. Disciplined thought will be needed to confront the reality of the new program's challenges with resolve that successes will come. A core ideology based on expressed values, purpose, and mission for the program is needed. From disciplined people and disciplined thought that is consistent with a strong and enduring core ideology will emerge disciplined actions that create lasting and sustainable results for the program and the faculty and students it serves. Disciplined employees who are internally driven to achieve results for their own sake push for change and improvement on their own before outside forces impose the need for change. A culture of discipline therefore will not be intimidated by the facts, but will naturally support a process of measuring and reporting challenges and successes while continually seeking improvements in distance learning student success. The continual improvement process across the organization builds sustainable quality in the program and in educational results.

Elements of Collins' (2005) four stages for cultural transformation are visible in the LSC–Online implementation steps taken thus far. With so many new staff joining the prior eCampus group, a cultural shift will occur among the LSC–Online employees, but the AVC needs to be deliberate in the selection and enculturation process. Disciplined thought and actions will appear as the new AVC implements the action plan components, but a clear mission and goals will be needed. Faculty acceptance of the changes will likely be a challenge, but the proposed insourcing model will encourage continued participation. Sustained greatness in the distance learning program can be achieved as faculty and LSC–Online staff work persistently to build the LSC–Online brand through completing the action plan and course development goals.

## **THE PERFECT STORM: ADMINISTRATIVE CONDITIONS OF AN EFFECTIVE ONLINE DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAM IN THE LONE STAR COLLEGE SYSTEM**

The perfect storm for creating an effective distance learning program in a multi-campus community college district potentially emerges at the Lone Star College System.

The following elements are converging to create the perfect storm (see Figure 5.1 below):

### *Benchmarked Effective Practices*

- Governance and Planning
- Technology Infrastructure
- Support Services for Students
- Curriculum and Design
- Faculty Issues
- Marketing and Branding

### *Catalytic Administrative Conditions*

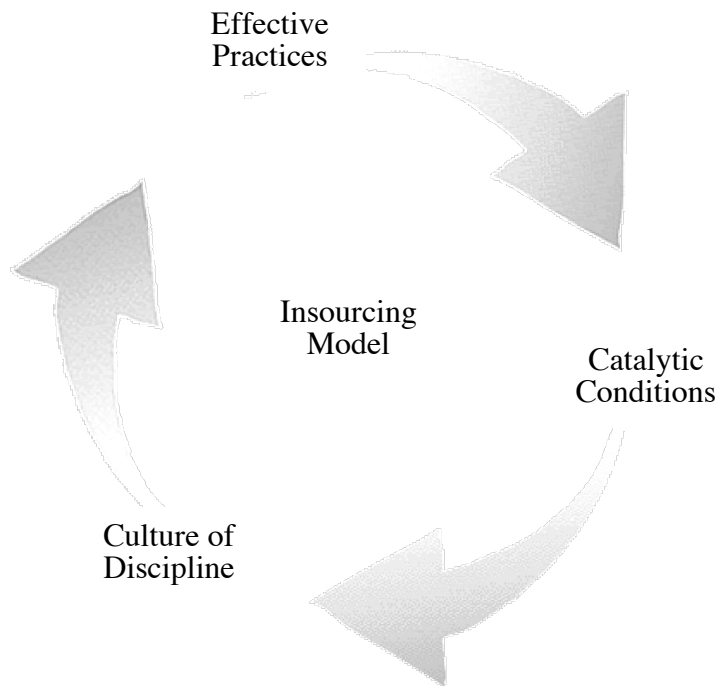
- Market Driven Mission and Goals
- Leadership
- Accountability
- Resource Capacity

### *Culture of Discipline*

- Disciplined People
- Disciplined Thought
- Disciplined Actions
- Building Greatness to Last

### *Insourcing Organizational Model*

- Single Point of Accountability
- Market Driven Strategic Plan
- Economic Incentive for District-wide Participation



*Figure 5.1.* The Perfect Storm: The Carstens Framework for Distance Learning in a Multi-College District Using an Insourcing Model

Lone Star College–Online has the capacity to become an effective organization that provides consistent quality, scalability, and market responsiveness. Through the establishment of benchmarked effective practices, supported by catalytic administrative conditions, embedded in a culture of discipline, and working within the framework of the insourcing model, the Lone Star College System can create a distance learning program that will foster distance learning student success and meet the needs of current and future students with flexibility and scalability.

## **NEW INSIGHTS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

Practical action research creates a continuous process for improvement through repeated cycles of research. At the conclusion of this study several new insights emerged for subsequent cycles of research.

### **LSC–Online Status Report**

An obvious iterative research cycle suggests that the LSC–Online program be researched again annually to explore the progress made thus far and the current challenges related to improving student success and meeting market needs.

### **Building Community for Distance Learning Practitioners**

The practitioners we visited from the various distance learning programs found the opportunity to exchange ideas and issues to be a valuable experience. Several expressed interest in conducting follow-up visits. Multi-campus community college distance learning practitioners might wish to research how a regular process for exchanging ideas could be accommodated without creating yet another professional organization. Perhaps collaborative or social networking distance learning technologies could be investigated to support this process.

### **Benchmarking Distance Learning Student Success**

In the search for benchmark distance learning institutions to visit, it became apparent that there were no established national criteria for assessing and reporting on the quality of various community college distance learning programs. No national organization has successfully established an instrument or agreed-upon process for measuring and reporting distance learning programs based on the insights from the literature. The Instructional Telecommunications Council (ITC, affiliated with the American Association of Community Colleges has attempted to compile such a database

in the past, but was unsuccessful due to a lack of common criteria for measuring and reporting distance learning student success.

It would be useful to research the barriers and formulate a process by which national comparative data could be collected and shared to support ongoing practical action research in distance learning.

### **Leadership**

Are there best practices for leadership in distance learning? This researcher found one research source related to the importance of leadership in distance learning. In his article, Beaudoin (2003) notes that very little is written about leadership for distance learning. He states, “the concept of ‘leadership’ is not widely recognized as a separate and distinct element of administrative practice or study” (§ 26). More study in this area is critical.

### **Creating Culture in an Online College**

Jim Collins’ (2005; 2001; 1994) research discusses the conditions necessary for building great organizations that produce great results. The cultural factors are applicable for organizations that are national or international in scope and are therefore not place-bound. If LSC–Online is successful in building a great culture, how will it be translated to the online experience for students and faculty? How will it be visible to students? How do distance learning leaders purposely spread a culture via online processes? How does the organizational culture of a distance learning support area impact the culture that emerges in the online course environments? Research in this area would be very helpful. This researcher was unable to find research sources that focus on creating great online cultures that produce student success.



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## VITA

D. Ryan Carstens graduated in 1976 from Putnam City High School in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. He went to Germany as an exchange student after high school. He graduated from Oklahoma State University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in German with a Social Studies minor and a Teaching Certificate option. While in college he served as a teacher and guidance counselor for summer German classes for gifted and talented junior high students. He later completed a Master of Science degree from Oklahoma State University in Curriculum and Instruction, with emphasis in Instructional Media and Technology. After working as an adjunct instructor at OSU, he was employed as a full time faculty member at the University of Houston-Victoria where he also developed the Technology Center for Teachers. He was then employed by Central Arizona College as the Coordinator of Instructional Technology Services where he worked on initial distance learning efforts. He later served in a division chair capacity at Yavapai College as the Director of Instructional Telecommunications and Yavapai County Extension Services, providing fully interactive video distance learning and television courses for students. At El Centro College in the Dallas County Community College District, he was employed as the Dean of Educational Resources where he worked with DCCCD's LeCroy Center for Educational Telecommunications to transition toward online distance learning technologies. At Rio Salado College, the "college without walls" that is part of the Maricopa Community College District, he provided leadership for distance learning as the Dean of Information Technologies Services, which comprised one third of the college enrollments. As the Director of Information Technologies Services at Eastern Idaho Technical College, he provided leadership for six high school district partners in an interactive video consortium in eastern Idaho, developed a library consortium in eastern

Idaho, and assisted the Albertson Foundation in designing and developing a statewide public school telecommunications network. As the District Director of Distance Learning and Instructional Technology in the Lone Star College System, he developed, and implemented all planning and operational aspects of the district-wide online distance learning program. At Lone Star College-Tomball, he provided faculty development and campus support for distance learning as the Dean of Technology Services and Educational Initiatives, while also enrolled as a doctoral student at the University of Texas at Austin. As the Dean of Educational Services at Lone Star College-Tomball, he provided leadership for the joint college/public library and faculty development and campus support for distance learning. As a student in the Community College Leadership Program, he graduated from the University of Texas at Austin with a Doctorate of Education in Educational Administration.

Permanent Address: 8107 Bent Oak Ln, Klein, Texas 77379

This manuscript was typed by the author.