Distance Education and the Academic Department: The Change Process

Developing online courses in a traditional academic department requires sensitive management of the change process

By **Ric Keaster**

Distance education has been one of the hottest and most controversial topics in higher education circles for approximately the past 10 years. It has been viewed at once as the panacea for educating the world and that which, through its inherent depersonalization of the academic process, will destroy higher education "as we know it."

This article addresses the development and implementation of distance education courses and programs within the context of an average-sized, traditional academic department in a public university in the southern United States. This case study

- briefly describes the department;
- notes why this department incorporated distance education as a part of its instructional delivery modes;
- explains the importance of the department chair in fostering and supporting innovation (that is, change); and
- describes what this department went through to get where they are now and why the "process" of change is important.

The Department in Context

The university is located in a city of approximately 50,000. The institution itself enrolls approximately 15,000 students across two campuses. When I was hired as department chair about five years ago, I assumed the leadership of a department possessing the following characteristics:

- Sixteen line positions across four programs (Adult Education, Higher Education Administration, P–12 Administration, Research/Statistics)
- Skewed distribution of faculty rank and experience (nine full professors with an average of 22 years' experience, mostly at this institu-

tion; one associate professor who became full professor within one year; and six assistant professors with less than four years' higher education experience)

- Faculty including two ex-chairs (one immediate past chair and his predecessor), the ex-dean of the college, and an internal candidate for chair over whom I was selected
- Relatively few policies and procedures in writing due to the culture of tradition in the department and the demographics of its personnel
- Traditional approaches by most of the faculty to instruction (little use of technology, no Web-based instruction, no online courses)

Several circumstances within the department, however, suited it for transition over the next few years. The State Department of Education had recently mandated sweeping reform of master's degree programs for the preparation of school principals, with much of the change aimed at modes of instruction. As a result, faculty were beginning to broaden their attitudes (and resultant practices) regarding instruction.

A second circumstance was the development of a critical mass of individuals eager for change within the department. In preliminary interviews with individual faculty, I sensed an emerging restlessness and anticipation for taking the department to another level. Some faculty members in the department might qualify as innovators or at least early adopters for the pioneering efforts I had in mind.

Lastly, five retirements took place in the three years under consideration (1999–2002), meaning those traditionally more resistant to change were becoming fewer in number. Whether screened for innovative attitudes or not, new faculty were generally more open to ideas concerning alternative delivery of courses.

The Department of Continuing Education and the office that provided technology support for distance education were responsible for promoting, managing, and enhancing the delivery of online instruction at the university. In 1998, the university offered its first two online courses with a combined enrollment of 22 students. As of late 2004, 281 courses were approved for online instruction, with the 97 courses offered for the fall semester having approximately 3,200 students enrolled. The university is not preeminent in online instruction in any way, but these numbers demonstrate growth and trends on campus. Distance education (via online instruction) showed early signs of becoming institutionalized at the university.

In 1999, the department I joined as chair had no online courses, and there were no rumblings of interest from departmental faculty. The department today has a total of 10 independent courses offered online and one 12-hour block of instruction in the master's program offered in an online-plus-one-visit-to-campus format spread across two semesters. How the department got from no online courses to a robust online element is a story of change management.

The Department Chair and Change

Much has been written on the importance of department chairpersons in carrying out the technical core of the academic side of a higher education institution.[1] Much like a school principal, the department chair is a key factor in the department's overall success and will be a major factor in any change efforts. As motivated faculty will testify, it is difficult to accomplish anything structurally unless the person holding the power to effect that change (the chair) either takes charge or at least supports their efforts.

More evidence will be offered below in this regard, as the various steps of the change process are explored—at least, as the process unfolded in this department. After examining the characteristics of successful change efforts, we can assess the department's experience using these established guidelines.

Distance Education and Successful Change

The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) in Austin, Texas, offers a set of Leadership for Change workshops. Although several change process models are available, the one SEDL employs uses "The Sacred Six" action steps based on years of research. SEDL claimed that these six steps, if followed meticulously, would increase an organization's chances for lasting success:

1. Create a context for change.
2. Clarify a shared vision and goals.
3. Provide for planning and resources.
4. Provide for training.
5. Monitor progress.
6. Provide continual assistance.

Although I had both taught these steps in my leadership classes and used them in my own research, I did not, as a new chair, consciously implement a formal process for change to develop distance education options within the department. Once the department reached a level of comfort with online instruction, I reflected on our experience to discover if these six steps were in evidence or at least a subconscious part of my strategy. The following is what I found.

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Create a Context for Change

Prior to my arrival on campus as the incoming department chair, I met confidentially with individual members of the faculty and staff. It was my goal, to the extent that they would confide in me, to find out what each felt needed to be done to improve the department and his or her individual effectiveness. I wanted to establish an understanding among them that I was approachable and that my goal as chair was both to improve the department and to help them be more effective in their jobs.

I encouraged some faculty to physically move their offices so that they would be in closer proximity to colleagues who taught within the same program (P–12 Administration faculty together, Adult Education faculty together, and so forth). Conceptually this made sense, and because the faculty was beginning to experience turnover, moving individuals became easier as new arrivals came into the department. One of the secretaries, as well, moved to the main office area to work more closely with me in the implementation of the new master's program.

Finally, using money I generated for the department through a grant, I moved from a small "faculty office" to a renovated area within the main office, most recently used for the copy room and storage. I believed this move conveyed a subtle message that the position of department chair differed from that of faculty and that I would be leading improvement efforts from this central, easily accessible office.

Formal policies and rules needed to be established as a part of the change process. I conducted two faculty retreats during my first year as chair (voluntary attendance), which produced a number of formalized practices (policies) concerning many aspects of departmental life (advising procedures, developing a flow chart for progress through the doctoral program, distributing responsibility guidelines for dissertation completion, developing new screening/admission criteria). I also appointed five committees to examine various aspects of the work of the faculty or the department. I sincerely believed that individuals would implement more completely and effectively what *they* had determined must be done. In effect, I adhered to the philosophy of Lao Tse (China, circa 595 B.C.): ". . . of a good leader, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, the people will say, 'We did this ourselves.'"

We also needed resources. Money provided by the administration to support the master's program, plus the dollars generated by the grant, gave us considerable flexibility for improving support for resources within the department. Marginal travel and equipment budgets were enhanced, making it clear that a historical lack of resources would not keep the department from succeeding. The department also initiated a point system for annual evaluations that rewarded activities like "substantially revised a syllabus," "developed a new course," and "attended professional development session (on teaching)."

All these developments helped set the

tone—the department would be doing things a little differently from before. A risk-taking environment with a chair who had a proactive orientation toward improvement efforts had been established. This contributed to creating the necessary context for change within the department.

Clarify a Shared Vision and Goals

With the preliminary tone set by my willingness to "shake up the apple cart," and by using input from those who offered suggestions for departmental improvement, I tried to tap into the faculty's natural impulses toward personal and professional satisfaction and pride. I used the first faculty meeting to announce a personal vision for the department: "best educational leadership department in the nation." Most of the faculty appeared to agree, at least tacitly, to chart a course for that outcome.

Naturally, there was some resistance to these changes. The literature provides a variety of reasons why individuals and groups resist change.[2] I tried to put myself in their place to understand their motives and to deal effectively with the resistance. Some of it was overt (which is much easier to confront and deal with), but much of it was covert, led by those possessing informal power within the department based on previous positions of formal power in the unit. While they initially succeeded in thwarting or slowing changes within the department, I found ways to go around them and convinced others to go with me. This process was particularly difficult for the junior faculty.[3]

The department made substantial revisions in policies and procedures. We revised the curriculum, adding several new courses and essentially changing the way the department did things—its culture. With the exception of a few faculty members, everyone agreed with where the department was headed and enjoyed the ride. Remember, also, that I hired several new faculty members in the three years under consideration, a circumstance that certainly aided in the change process.

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Provide for Planning and Resources

The first online course was a basic research course taught by one of the newer research/statistics faculty members. She had served on the Technology and Distance Education Committee and expressed an early interest in teaching online. Since she would teach the first online course for the department, I arranged for a release from one course during the semester before she taught her online course. This practice continued throughout the development of all the department's online courses and the block of online instruction—faculty involved received one course reduction to work on the upcoming semester's online course.

Additionally, the Continuing Education department had adopted a policy of monetary reward for faculty and for departments to develop courses for online instruction. Each faculty member received $600 for each new course developed, and the faculty member's department received $400. Although the latter money could have gone to the department's developmental accounts, I made the decision to "sweeten the pot" for faculty by turning the department's portion over to the faculty member. I felt that if they were willing to take risks and invest the time necessary to develop courses for this type of delivery, they should reap whatever rewards were available. This was certainly important in the existing budget crisis—not only had there been three successive budget cuts, at one point it had been three years since faculty received raises.

Additionally, with the money the administration continued to provide to support the master's degree program, I purchased three new computers for those faculty delivering the 12-hour online block of courses. This was a way to tie a reward directly to their distance education effort.

There are creative ways of providing not only the resources but also the motivation for faculty as they begin to consider and ultimately participate in distance education. Each institutional situation is different, but these types of inducements succeeded in our department.

Provide for Training

The Continuing Education and the technology departments have been the primary purveyors and promoters of online instruction at the university. Numerous workshops, seminars, and other instructional support have been provided for faculty and administrators. Everything from fundamental tools for using technology (word processing, data management, PowerPoint, and so forth) to using the university's preferred software program (WebCT) has been and continues to be offered on a regular basis.

At my department's request, the technology department provided individualized instruction to help faculty with course and Web site development. I also brought in a consultant from an institution in Florida who had considerable experience with Web-based and online instruction for a workshop with faculty.

Finally, I continued to encourage faculty to pursue these types of sessions on their own at professional meetings and other venues. In addition, where I had input on shaping the program at professional meetings, I supported opportunities for them to make presentations. This set up these faculty as expert (or at least experienced) on an issue where others sought information, allowing for some professional "strokes" that all faculty enjoy.

Monitor Progress

Change efforts in education seem to emerge on a regular basis. The first four

steps of the change process model are followed meticulously in these change efforts but with a decided lack of ongoing or long-term follow-up to ensure that the innovation has taken root. If the formalized effort stops at this point, two things are likely to happen.

First, enthusiasm for the effort will probably fade, and earlier gains will lose momentum or even be lost. A term in the physical sciences describes this: *homeostasis*—"the tendency of a system to maintain internal stability or equilibrium, owing to the coordinated response of its parts to a situation tending to disturb its normal condition."[4] Organizations and the people within them serve as a case in point. Change is uncomfortable, and a commonly known change maxim asserts that for some*thing* to change, some*one* must change. The deeper and more thorough the change, the greater the likelihood the change will endure and become part of the culture.

The second outcome is that innovation, regardless of earlier fidelity to the change process, will never achieve full implementation and realize the maximum benefits the modification could provide. The energy, time, and resources spent to achieve the outcome might never actually take place, and it might have been better for the effort to have never been undertaken at all—given the potential for negative aftereffects.

Monitoring progress is necessary if leaders of change efforts expect participants to follow through. It is not that the participants are recalcitrant and don't believe in the planned changes, necessarily; the homeostasis phenomenon is at work. Monitoring progress and checking up on things sends the message that the new approach is an important part of what we do and that we should attempt to refine it as we go.

In the setting under consideration, I regularly visited with those faculty involved in the delivery of online courses. I asked how things were going, what problems they were encountering, what modifications/adjustments they were making, and what I could do to help them. This told them I cared not only about the course and its instruction but also about their satisfaction with the process. I also participated in some of the instruction during the course's chat room sessions, demonstrating my willingness to engage personally, and not just participate through their experiences.

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Provide Continual Assistance

This last step is a logical sequel to step five. If more resources (computers, software programs, technical support, and so on) were needed, I found a way to provide those for the faculty. If a faculty member needed a session with another faculty member to discuss online instruction, whether inside or outside the department, I arranged that meeting. I did what I could to provide support commensurate with what I provided initially. This sent the message that follow-through was a must for faculty to reach maximum effectiveness. "Coaching" is a term used in the literature for this step. I did what was necessary to help the faculty work their way through difficult periods during implementation and refine the process for eventual success.

Although I have not provided as much information for steps five and six as for the earlier steps, this should not be taken as a suggestion that these steps are not as important. On the contrary, these two steps are the most important in making change last. They tend to be somewhat symbolic, although tangible support is sometimes needed. Additionally, the types of support and assistance necessary at these stages tend to be situational, and it is difficult to generalize responses for administrators. Leaders should do whatever is necessary to make sure that follow-through is achieved. Otherwise, earlier effort may be entirely wasted, and future efforts may experience greater resistance as a result.

Joyce and Showers[5] and Bush[6] determined that more than 80 percent of the variance in successful change efforts lies within these final two steps. What this tells organizational change agents is that the first four steps will only guarantee that efforts will be marginally successful, whereas leaders might realize greater success if they carry out steps five and six as well. This research and these conclusions should speak volumes to any leader attempting changes or innovations in culture or practice.

Final Thoughts

I assembled these final thoughts in an attempt to offer some closing bits of wisdom. They can be applied in general to any change effort, but they emanate from my experiences as the department chair introducing distance education in this particular setting.

- Plan up front to work your way through the change effort. I was fortunate in having apparently internalized the basic process. Planning—using the Sacred Six from the beginning with a vision in mind—would have helped.
- Be creative in providing stimuli or motivation for your people. Appeal to

their sense of improving the organization and achieving self-actualization.

- Engage them in the process of creating a need for change. Assumed ownership of a problem and solution is an extremely effective motivator.
- Change is personal. Tend to the "people side" of change. Focus on their needs as you work your way through the process.
- Capitalize on the success of innovators and early adopters in the organization. The theory of building on small wins applies here.
- Success begets success—that is, incidental benefits or spin-offs. As a result of the department's success with distance education, it has increased its master's as well as its specialist's and doctoral program enrollments.[7]
- Remove obstacles or barriers that might arise during implementation, if possible. If not, solve problems together.
- Late adopters eventually come around. Be persistent. Ask more than once and in a variety of ways.
- Leaders of each organization must determine whether online instruction and distance education are right for them. There is too much invested (time, money, faculty energy) to merely jump on what might be perceived as this technology-driven bandwagon. Once committed, however, follow through as completely as possible.
- Make sure you don't stop anywhere short of the last steps in the Sacred Six.

Limited space prevents detailed reports on feedback the department received concerning the online instruction we offered. Suffice it to say, the vast majority of what the students reported was very positive. Several conditions contributed to this response: definitive need on the part of students for distance instruction; outstanding instructors able to adapt course content to online delivery; and open-minded, flexible faculty who could work through technology snafus that tend to characterize conversion efforts. Students appreciated participating in a quality program without having to be physically present on campus for the instruction. Faculty likewise appreciated the need for the program to provide this accommodation for students. While I believe all involved still prefer face-to-face instruction, they also feel that the difference in the quality of instruction between the two modes of delivery is negligible.

Administrators also value what the program has accomplished. Initially, the program moved from approximately 75 graduates per year through more traditional instruction to add one cohort of 15–20 local students in the new program. Online instruction allowed us to open the offering to a national cohort and an international cohort as well (50–60 per year). Additionally, as a result of the success we experienced in the master's program, several specialist's and doctoral-level online courses were developed that allowed greater flexibility for our national and international students. That also increased enrollments and improved recruiting efforts in those programs.

Numerous courses are already available online, as well as entire degrees offered by reputable institutions. The legitimacy of online instruction continues to grow and take deeper root. Students demand accessibility, and online courses are about as convenient as higher education instruction can be.

Many questions remain about distance education in its various forms, and this article has only dealt with one situation in one setting. I have focused not on the appropriateness of introducing online course, but on what it took to make it happen. Each institution and program must evaluate its own nature and circumstances. In the situation under consideration here, the faculty liked what the department was doing and sought ways to expand their offerings. Change of this nature can take place effectively even in a fairly traditional department within a college or university, especially if the leaders pay close attention to and understand the process of change involved. *e*

Endnotes

1. I. W. D. Hecht, M. L. Higgerson, and W. H. Gmelch, *The Department Chair as Academic Leader*, American Council on Education Oryx Press Series on Higher Education (Phoenix, Ariz.: American Council on Education/Oryx Press, 1998); and A. F. Lucas, *Leading Academic Change: Essential Roles for Department Chairs* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000).
2. M. Fullan, *Leading in a Culture of Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2001); and R. L. Larson, *Changing Schools from the Inside Out* (Lancaster, Penn.: Technomic Publishing Co., 1992).
3. The role conflict experienced by junior faculty in such an environment calls into question the credibility of traditional tenure and promotion processes. More than once I had to counsel these insecure junior faculty members and encourage them to do what was right rather than bend to the pressures of the tenured elite. They could at least respect themselves, and that was important. I also promised that, given acceptable productivity, they would have my unyielding support in future promotion efforts.
4. Atkinson Center for Society and Child Development (ACSCD), at <http://www.acscd.ca/acscd/public/home.nsf/printing/618B53504A8BAAF585256BB800613643> (accessed March 29, 2005).
5. B. Joyce and B. Showers, "Improving Inservice Training: The Messages of Research," *Educational Leadership*, Vol. 37, No. 5, 1980, pp. 379–385.
6. R. N. Bush, "Effective Staff Development," in *Making Our Schools More Effective: Proceedings of Three State Conferences* (San Francisco: Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, 1984), pp. 223–238.
7. Although the school didn't collect data to support this assertion, the claim follows logically from shifts in enrollment. For example, some of the students who went through the national/international master's program subsequently enrolled in the doctoral program, almost certainly as a result of the outreach offered with our online program. Success in the master's program online courses allowed us to move online courses into the specialist's and doctoral programs, which made them more attractive to students seeking access to advanced degrees, and enrollment in those programs also increased.

Ric Keaster (ric.keaster@wku.edu) is Associate Dean for Administration and Research at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green.