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DEVELOPING SUCCESSFUL ONLINE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS AT THE COLLEGE LEVEL: GUIDELINES BASED ON THE LITERATURE

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**Developing Successful Online Educational Programs at the College Level: Guidelines
Based on the Literature**

Synopsis:

This research deals with how universities throughout the country have attempted to develop online courses. This study will hopefully provide a better understanding of the issues to be considered when developing online educational programs as well as suggest a framework by which colleges and universities can develop future programs.

**DEVELOPING SUCCESSFUL ONLINE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS AT THE
COLLEGE LEVEL: GUIDELINES BASED ON THE LITERATURE**

Dissertation Proposal

By

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Abstract

This research deals with how universities throughout the country have attempted to develop online courses. There are many concerns being considered by colleges, among those training teachers, developing new courses as well as transitioning existing classroom courses to an online format, faculty training and readiness, assessment and technology to name a few. Student feedback plays an important role, but appears to be largely ignored in the development phase as other concerns such as technology and growth have moved to the forefront. Broadly defined, online courses are any that replace classroom attendance with computer focused education and are either hybrid (those that meet in the classroom as well as online) and asynchronous (those that are completely online without any classroom attendance). Most research tends to indicate that while colleges are focusing on technology, student satisfaction seems to result from largely classroom based phenomena such as feedback and social presence.

It is this confusion I believe which has resulted in many of the failures that colleges and universities have suffered while attempting to go online. This dissertation addresses that problem and suggests a holistic focus in which all things are to

be considered, encompassing technology needs as well as those of the students and instructors.

This study will hopefully provide a better understanding of the issues to be considered when developing online educational programs as well as suggest a framework by which colleges and universities can develop future programs.

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Introduction

In 2009, Barack Obama became the first African American president in the history of the United States. But, like his predecessors before him, he comes to office with a great many promises regarding education and dreams of the availability of higher learning to all those who seek a degree. But how will education reach the people? Is it conceivable that everyone will have the opportunity to physically attend college? Can the existing economic paradigm by which American colleges have historically existed continue to work? Does our existing curriculum and methods of curriculum delivery provide effective and accessible learning opportunities?

There are no perfect answers to these questions, but for educational reformers, these may be among the most pressing questions of the day. Though the college and university system must change with the times and attempt, in doing so, to address the uncertainties of the future, what has become clear is the growth of online learning as an alternative to the traditional classroom learning. Allen and Seaman (2008) report

Online enrollments have continued to grow at rates far in excess of the total higher education student population, with the most recent data demonstrating no signs of slowing. Over 3.9 million students were taking at least one online course during the fall 2007 term; a 12 percent increase over the number reported the previous year. The 12.9 percent growth rate for online enrollments far exceeds the 1.2 percent growth of the overall higher education student population. Over twenty percent of all U.S. higher education students were taking at least one online course in the fall of 2007. (p.1)

With online learning still fairly new in terms of educational methods of delivery, there has been extensive focus on student perceptions and factors for success. Most notably social presence (SP) has been identified among the most

consistent factors for success and teacher immediacy behaviors have been isolated as amongst the most common factors leading to the perception of SP (Moore and Masterson, 1996). The exact definition of SP will be discussed later in this paper, but for general purposes the term refers to the culture and experience of the classroom as it is perceived by students. More specifically, this term refers to the social experience of taking a course and is most influenced by environmental issues beyond curriculum such as instructor's personality and teaching style. Though course content is a part of the formula, it is a far less significant portion of the overall experience. Teacher immediacy behaviors as the term suggests are those that make instructors seem approachable and concerned with the welfare of their students. Students who have perceived their instructor's behavior as high in immediacy have reported positive affects such as increased satisfaction (Moore and Masterson, 1996), and increased motivation (Christophel, 1990), to name a few.

Even with the obvious growth in online education and the conclusions regarding teacher immediacy, teacher impressions regarding SP and the online delivery of content have been largely ignored. Most studies in regards to teachers and online learning focus on strategies in regards to delivering content,

but few if any actually focus on teacher impressions and experiences regarding online education. This is a significant oversight as it is obvious that the heart of classroom and online courses begin with the teacher's efforts not only in the design and implementation of most courses, but also in the source of SP as it is perceived by students in creating, holding, and sustaining the online classroom space. To this end, Allen and Seaman (2008) report:

Six years of data show only a small improvement in the proportion of institutions who say that their faculty fully accept the value and legitimacy of online education. A majority of institutions remain either neutral or negative on this issue. We know, however, that there are huge differences in this belief between those who have no plans for online (where only 3.7% say their faculty accept it) and those institutions that are already fully engaged with online (where the percentage jumps to 62.1). No other variable shows this same pattern. (p.1)

The growth of online learning coupled with the questions regarding the legitimacy of electronic educational mediums, further underscores the need for research in this area. Specifically, further research is necessary regarding/investigating the instructor's role and perceptions regarding online education as well as research focusing on student success and the perception of value in online learning. If online learning is to become the vehicle by which education is made available to all, it is imperative that we begin to address the issues by which these courses can be successfully created and delivered.

History and Current Trends in Education

The attempt to improve education through means other than purely curriculum driven standards has a long and rich history. Though the progress which has made online education possible, and thus inquiries such as this regarding the factors involved in the successful development and implementation of online courses, it is important to acknowledge the role of educational reform and specifically those that worked to change education for the better. For the purpose of this literature

review, I will briefly mention the work of John Dewey to offer a historical perspective in regards to educational reform.

The focus on and consequent attempts to improve educational paradigms is not a new phenomenon, and these very efforts are further proof of our ongoing attempts to find better methods. New trends in education are commonplace in the literature, featuring a variety of different starting and end points for inquiry. Most tend to focus on largely extrinsic "end results" such as test scores or graduation rates and use those quantifiable results as a standard for determining success or failure. Implicit in this approach is the notion of student performance as a barometer for success in other areas of education including classroom instruction itself and subsets of those activities including teacher performance and subsequent ratings (usually a result of surveys administered to students), actual curriculum and in some cases administrators and administrative functions. While these efforts are not without merit, they seem to ignore some of the more basic foundational qualities of classroom education such as the nature and quality of communication that takes place and how the direction and patterns of communication we establish in our classrooms effect the actual learning environment.

The focus on improvements in education has long been an offshoot of the ongoing debate between standardized classroom education and more creative approaches to learning. From these two opposites have spawned most, if not all educational trends as theorists continue to struggle to find which of the two have the greatest potential for educational success. The PBS documentary *School: The Story of American Public Education* reminds us of this very fact:

The progressive side of the educational continuum champions intellectual freedom as the cornerstone of democratic society. Student autonomy, creativity, and curiosity are espoused as leading forces in a meaningful education. The "back to basics" advocates believe that curriculum should be standardized and students drilled on its content to ensure a basic level of skill. Many educational trends in the last century represent one of these two basic positions. On the progressive side are the intellectual descendants of John Dewey. Whole language

reading instruction, hands-on learning, alternative assessments, and multiple intelligence theory are contemporary representatives of this end of the continuum. In opposition stand phonics, computational skills, standardized tests, and the fact-based learning programs. (2001)

Our attempts to improve upon existing educational techniques owe their existence in large part to John Dewey's progressive or pragmatic movement. The idea that we can consider educational methods beyond standardization began with Dewey and is humanistic approach to education in general. Dewey's approach to learning, considers the experience of the students as an integral part of the learning environment and an important part of the learning process. Though Dewey himself noted the importance of curriculum and the retention of important facts, he was also quick to note the human element of education and the variety and unpredictability of learning environments. In his book *Democracy and Education*, Dewey writes:

But there are conspicuous dangers attendant upon the transition from indirect to formal education. Sharing in actual pursuit, whether directly or vicariously in play, is at least personal and vital. These qualities compensate, in some measure, for the narrowness of available opportunities. Formal instruction, on the contrary, easily becomes remote and dead-abstract and bookish, to use the ordinary words of depreciation. What accumulated knowledge exists in low grade societies is at least put into practice: it is transmitted into character; it exists with the depth of meaning that attaches to its coming within urgent daily interests.

(1916, Page 8)

In emphasizing the human element of education and the unpredictability that comes with the needs of learners, Dewey set the stage for education to be seen as more than the transference of information.

*The Culture of Technology and The Culture Of Education: an
odd partnership*

In the last 20 years, education has experienced what I believe to be the first truly significant change in the culture of education. Online education to me marks the first true shift in educational paradigm since John Dewey. But unlike Dewey, this change is in the delivery of education as opposed to theoretical applications.

To date, it can be argued that theoretical applications have resulted in the primary shifts in educational paradigms and pedagogy. But the surge in online education and facets of the online experience such as social networking communities, necessitate a shift in our thinking far more complicated than theoretical discussions. The true significance of online education is the change in the actual delivery of education, a change in which the actual educational process has been transformed. Both the roles of the instructor and students have changed.

It is arguable that in the past, the role of the students has remained relatively unchanged and that the instructors' role was subject to change as a result of these theoretical, pedagogical discussions. This is no longer the case. With

online education, delivery is now purely in the hands of technology, while instructors are forced to adapt their in-class applications in a manner suitable to the technology.

Education and technology are an odd pairing because technology is defined by change and improvements, whereas education has stayed relatively the same for the last 300 years. Arguably, the biggest change in education IS online education.

This represents sort of an odd partnership because if you ask me to describe education I will describe a scene which many others are likely to describe as well, which will include desks, teachers and classmates, etc. But, if you were to ask someone about technology, you would likely get a statement focused on improvements or upgrades, but certainly based on change.

I will refer to this general perception of education as the *culture of education*, because I believe that culture and education have much in common, especially their looking to the past to define themselves (historic foundation) and relatively static nature.

Technology on the other hand is based on change. I believe if you ask someone to describe or define technology they would speak in terms of changes, improvements and the ease with which

things or tools are used. I will refer to this as the *culture of technology*. In this way education is much like a culture. Cultures often define themselves by looking at the past and the patterns of the past, even though the present looks much different.

For online learners and instructors, the current culture of education is likely an odd place. On the one hand we have our educational experience. For most, likely a historically unchanged picture of teachers, desks, and classmates, all located in the same room. But when it comes to the culture of technology, I believe we are always looking for change. Online education, then is an odd partnership in which its participants (students and teachers) have very different experiences regarding the two main factors in online delivery; technology and education. I refer to this phenomenon as *The Online Education Perception Gap*.

I believe that for this reason students as well as faculty are less likely to find educational satisfaction or rate their educational experiences in solely technological terms. And this is the reason that the online educational experience are so important as we continue to develop online education in hopes of creating the best possible learning environments. Until we have

the first generation of purely online learners, or those who have experienced an entire educational experience online, we need to look to the typical perceptions or culture of education as we develop online learning communities. I believe that efforts to improve online education and enhance the learning experience must take into consideration the existing research on faculty perceptions regarding the delivery of online courses and student feedback regarding the perceived value of online education and the differences in our educational and technological experiences.

Review of the Literature

For the purpose of this study, the review of literature will begin with demographic info on online instructors and students and then focus on two categories: student feedback regarding online experiences particularly student satisfaction data and the concept of social presence (SP) and teacher feedback regarding the experience of teaching online. It is important to examine both as they are arguably the two main components to developing successful online programs. It is important for the purpose of this study to gain a better

understanding of the makeup of online faculty as well as students.

Online demographics: Faculty

Demographic surveys of online instructors tend to emphasize a variety of factors. Many global studies do not identify gender, but of those that have, the findings reflect the same trends we have seen in classrooms over the years. Glick (2011) reports that the 75 percent of all instructors are female, and that just over 78 percent of online instructors are female as well. Just over 83 percent report their ethnicity to be white/non-Hispanic, with the next closest population being Hispanic at just over 7 percent. (Pg. 10) Shea (2007) in looked at the motivating factors behind the choice of teaching online, found the majority of instructors to be female, but also part time/non-traditional faculty (lecturers, instructors and adjuncts) due in large part to the need for schedule flexibility. Shea also found that most instructors tend to be 45 years and older due to the interest in experimenting with pedagogy. (Pg. 6) Dickson and Osborne (2011) report that 66

percent of all online instructors hold teaching positions, while nearly one-fourth were administrators or instructional designers. (Pg. 6) This is an interesting development that may underscore the tendency to emphasize technical expertise over classroom experience when choosing online instructors. Kim and Bonk (2006) looked at tenure status of online instructors and found that 59.9 percent were tenured while 18.7 were tenure track and 21.4 percent were non-tenure track.

Online demographics: Students

The student landscape has just begun to change since the inception of online learning, the most significant of these changes being the age of online learners. Initially, the majority of online learners were older than traditional college students, as most cited the primary reason for enrolling in online courses was to complete a new or unfinished degree while having the flexibility to work. This is still, for the most part the makeup of the online learner, although that has begun to change. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2010) reports that in 2008-09 52 percent of all online students were 25 and under. Dickson and Osborne (2011) found the average age to 27.5 years

(Pg. 11), Moore and Kearsley (2005) found the age range of most online students to be 25-50. These numbers reflect a gradual decrease in the age of the typical online learner and could be attributed to any number of factors including the growth of online learning programs, technical expertise and acceptance of online learning by students, or increasing movement on the part K-12 schools towards growth online. Ethnicity has not shown as significant a change as age. Glick (2011) reports that just over 59 percent of all online students are white/non-Hispanic, with the second largest population being Hispanic at just over 16 percent. This is an unusually low number given the large Hispanic population in the US and may be directly attributable to the lack of ESL (English as a second language) content available online.

*Student Perceptions of the Online Experience: Social
Presence*

Student feedback at the university level is a highly complex matter, usually involving institutional-wide surveys issued to students either in class or online. Many colleges and universities base a good deal of their institution-wide

decisions on the results of these surveys, as enrollment has always been one of the most important factors for schools nation-wide. For the purposes of this study, I will define student satisfaction as the perceived value as his or her educational experiences at an educational institution ((Astin, 1993). Student satisfaction with online education can vary based on a variety of experiences from social to educational and intrinsic factors. Herbert (2006) identified several factors key to students success in online courses including faculty responsiveness to students needs, quality of online instruction, Timely faculty feedback, institutional response to questions in a timely manner, frequency of student and instructor interaction, availability of adequate financial aid and student-to-student collaboration. Lorenzo (2007) lists 7 components to success including a reliable technology system, clear guidelines for class assignments and faculty feedback, appropriate technology standards to deliver instruction, meaningful learning experiences to demonstrate students' ability of analysis, synthesis and evaluating content, facilitated interaction among students and between students and faculty, facilitation of student self-motivation and commitment, and access to adequate

technical assistance and orientation prior to the course. Though there are many factors involved in student satisfaction of online learning, among the most frequently cited is social presence.

The theory of social presence (SP), specifically the history of SP and current role in online education figures prominently in the literature on student perceptions of online coursework. The primary purpose here is to show that while current research on SP shows great promise in regards to the continued development of online courses, there are several missing pieces which need to be the focus of future research. Among the most significant are instructor's perceptions of SP, as well as any effort/discussion to create a tool by which SP might be implemented in online classes across the curriculum. The existing research on SP is undertaken in many fields and has many applications. I have chosen to focus on SP as primary factor in student satisfaction and the specific direction of current research on SP. This section represents a sample of existing research on SP, specifically as it relates to instructors and students.

Social Presence Defined

The idea of social presence (SP) as well as its role in electronic communication mediums, was originally discussed by John Short, Ederyn Williams, and Bruce Christie in their book *The Social Psychology of Telecommunications* (1976) in which they defined SP as "The degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience (and perceived intimacy and immediacy) of the interpersonal relationships." (p. 164)

In their discussion of the effects of different electronic communications mediums on users, the authors emphasize that most individuals will seek out the mediums they feel will offer SP and avoid those that don't. (Short et al., 1976). In particular their work emphasizes the desire of users of electronic mediums to choose video applications over those featuring only audio as the face to face interaction is perceived as potentially richer or of greater interpersonal quality.

Though their definition focuses largely on the experience in electronic educational settings, SP as I will be examining it, is the extent to which a student feels connected in the larger fabric of the classroom experience and the extent to which they see themselves as an important part of the educational process. A more global focus from which I will

be working is offered by Richardson and Swan: "Originally construed as an inherent feature of differing media, social presence may also be explored by examining a variety of issues which may contribute to the social climate of the classroom." (p. 70).

Though the idea of SP only goes back to 1976, there has been no shortage of studies that attempt to isolate the factors that lead to SP. Among those are frequency of student/teacher interactions (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison & Archer, 1999), perceived levels of instructor activity (Swan & Shih, 2005), student led discussions (Rourke & Anderson, 2002), and perceived group membership (Rogers, & Lea. 2005) to name a few.

Immediacy Behaviors

Among the classroom perceptions that students report as factor in experiencing SP, the most commonly reported is teacher immediacy behaviors. The concept of teacher immediacy was originally reported by Wiener and Mehrabian and was defined as "the distance a communicator puts between themselves and the object of their message" (1968).

The majority of the research on teacher immediacy takes place in regular classroom settings and usually focuses on

verbal and nonverbal behavior as the factors regularly associated with the perception of immediacy, and thus SP (Rourke, et al 1999). Students who have perceived their instructor's behavior as high in immediacy have reported positive affects such as increased satisfaction (Moore and Masterson, 1996), and increased motivation (Christophel, 1990), to name a few.

Faculty Perceptions of The Online Experience

One of the more comprehensive efforts to gauge the development of online education in the United States is the annual report *Going The Distance: Online Education in the United States*. In their annual report of online education, Seaman and Allen report that online education has continued to grow in the U.S. with a total of 6.1 million students reporting to have taken at least one online course in 2010, an increase of 560,000 students from the previous year. (pg. 4) In this same report, however the increase of faculty acceptance of the legitimacy of online delivery is 32%, an increase of less than 6% from 2002 to 2011. (pg. 5) Arguably, the success of any course or method of delivery for that matter, must have faculty support. Why then, with online enrollment numbers continuing to grow, are faculty still reluctant to accept online delivery as a legitimate form

of course implementation? One possible explanation could be the training supplied for instructors. Seaman and Allen (2011) report that nearly one-fifth of all academic institutions provide no online training for their faculty. (pg. 19) This is particularly significant when one compares the level of online training with the normal amount of training provided in most single subject and multi-subject credential programs. These are amongst the most structured and intensive programs which offer not only classroom based instruction but field preparation as well in the form of student teaching. It comes as no surprise then that teacher's perceptions of technology are influenced by teaching experience as well as experience using technology (Bussey et al.2000; Stromfors & Glazewski 2002; Kanaya et al. 2005), as well as factors such as university leadership (Hogarty et al. 2003). Other factors relating to faculty satisfaction include Intellectual challenge and an interest in technology (Panda & Mishra, 2007), self gratification (Rockwell et al.,1999),collaboration opportunities with other faculty (Sloan Consortium 2006), compensation and course quality (Bower 2001).

Online Learning: Best Practices

There is no shortage of research on best online practices for students and instructors. The research focusing on instructional methods tends to focus on course development and best practices while the student-centered research tends to focus on necessary skills both educational and technical. For the purpose of this study, a brief review of both will be shown in order to present a sample of the current thinking on successful strategies for instruction and students.

Online learners: strategies for success

It is not difficult to find information on preparing students for the challenges of online learning. Not surprisingly, the majority of information comes in the form of "tips for preparation" presented by the same institution which are already established as large online colleges. They are for the most part advertisements designed to entice potential students, most of which are oversimplified and serve as actual links or information portals to college websites. Of the actual academic undertakings, many seem to highlight similar skill sets, many of which are consistent with traditional classroom experience. Roper (2007) reviewed a student population who had graduated from programs that offered up 80 percent of the

curriculum online. From this population, he identified several factors as common indicators of success including developing time management strategies, frequent interaction, frequent application and review course materials, asking frequent questions, self-motivation, and connecting with other students. Schrum and Hong (2002) identified factors both extrinsic and intrinsic as indicators of success including access to technology, technology experience, personal awareness of learning style, study habits and skills, awareness of goals and purposes, lifestyle factors conducive to online learning (mostly schedule related), and personal traits and characteristics such as time management and self-motivation. (pp 60-65). Song, et. al (2004) found that indicators of success were often perceptual in nature including perceptions of course design and technology being "friendly" and students feelings regarding their own levels of self-motivation. (pp. 59-70). Yukselturk and Bulut (2007) found that intrinsic goal orientation, task value, self-efficacy, and cognitive-strategy use, were all factors in online success as well as strategies for self-regulation including self-evaluation, organization, and transformation; goal setting and planning; seeking information, keeping records, and monitoring; environment structuring; self-consequences;

rehearsing and memorizing; seeking social assistance; and reviewing records. (pp 78-80).

Strategies for Successful Online Instruction

There are also similarities in the research on best practices for online instruction. These, like the research on student characteristics also reflect what we have learned from traditional college classrooms. Though there are varying opinions as to what works, a common theme is communication. While communication is an important factor in any educational setting, the emphasis of student contact in online settings is continuously cited as a primary factor for successful instruction as well as a main factor in the development of pedagogy. Shelton and Saltsman (2004) recommend that course communication be initiated and monitored by instructors as well as "nurtured" through exercises designed to encourage students to maintain constant communication with instructors as well as other students. Savery (2005) identifies the characteristics of a successful online instructor using the acronym VOCAL (visual, organized, compassionate, analytical and leader-by-example). Of interest in Savery's model is that visibility actually refers to the efforts an instructor needs to make due to the lack of

visibility that an online environment creates. According to Savery, the effort to be visible requires communication in the form of an instructor website, timely feedback to assignments and individual posts, continuous email contact with individuals and the class as a whole, a regularly updated welcome page, updated course calendars and video messaging if possible. Salmon (2004) refers to the role of the online instructors as an "E-moderator" or one who promotes human interaction and communication through the modeling, conveying and building of knowledge and skill. (p. 4) The "e-moderator" Salmon argues, is the key to online instruction in the future due to the necessity of constant communication in online applications as well as the technological focus and advances in communications technology. Keengwe and Kidd (2010) divide the online instructor's role into four categories; pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical. While each role plays a part, the social role is considered significant as it creates a friendly social environment necessary for online learning.

The often cited emphasis on communication factors necessary for success is an especially significant factor for colleges and universities as it underscores the need to emphasize instructional qualities ahead of technology when

designing online courses. This is not to say that technology is not an important consideration, but I would argue that a good instructor can get past faulty technology, but no amount of technology can make up for poor instruction.

Data Collection

The primary form of data for this study is existing research on the development of online educational programs at the college and university level. The literature will be broken into three specific areas: student satisfaction surveys regarding online experiences, instructor experiences teaching online and administrative efforts in developing and supporting online instruction. Student satisfaction data will be examined so that common threads regarding positive experiences online can be identified. The research regarding instructors' experiences and perceptions of teaching online will be reviewed with the same focus, isolating threads which point towards perceived satisfaction, value and success in online instruction. The research of administrative efforts will attempt to isolate and identify successful practices in regards to the administration, development and support of online efforts.

Delimitations and Limitations

One potential limit of this study is that it's entirely research based. While the research on the development of online educational programs is plentiful, there are no universal guides or agreements as to what are best practices. An actual study based on the research outcomes, would also be helpful, but is not included here. Another potential limitation is research bias. This is a concern in any in any study that is purely research-based, although I have attempted to avoid this to the best of my ability. The focus on social presence and teacher immediacy is also a limitation as there are many other factors I have identified in the research but have spent less time exploring than SP and TI in regards to student satisfaction research. A wider sample of the research in general for best practices at the university level could also have been included, as well as additional research on students satisfaction and instructional training methods. Other factors in addition to student satisfaction data, faculty training, and administrative practices could also have been reviewed here as well.

Discussion and Conclusions

The discussion section will include a thorough analysis of the implications of the study, particularly how the research can inform future development of online educational courses at the college level. A model will be proposed based on the literature emphasizing best practices in the three areas of focus on in this study: training instructors to teach online, using and analyzing student success research and the role of administration in proposing and supporting online development. It is hoped that this research will serve as a guideline for the future development and success of online educational programs.

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