

Book Reviews

Distance Learning in Higher Education: A Programmatic Approach to Planning, Design, Instruction, Evaluation, and Accreditation

Alfred P. Rovai, Michael K. Ponton, and Jason D. Baker

New York: Teachers College Press 2008, 211 pages, \$49.00 (hardcover)

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Student learning is central to student affairs and knowing about distance learning, as well as in-class learning, helps professionals better serve distance learning students, on campus students, and commuter students. Distance learning is already used by student affairs professionals to provide effective learning opportunities for topics from leadership to alcohol education to student affairs degrees. Learning to be more effective with this learning modality will positively impact student learning.

Rovai, Ponton, and Baker are ambitious in their quest to provide an overview of distance learning by covering everything the title suggests, and the authors fulfill their ambitions well. They provide a language to talk about teaching, learning, learning communities, learner autonomy, and social constructivism all within the context of distance learning. The material is well documented and the concrete strategies presented apply to both large scale and small single distance learning experiences making this book a good starting place to develop student affairs related distance learning.

The structure of the book, like the structure of any good learning experience, provides a context that begins with a general overview of distance learning concepts in chapter 1. The authors move on in chapters 2 and 3 to explore how gender and culture can influence learning. This attention to gender and culture will help student affairs professionals become

more sensitive to the issues of distance learning students and become more effective designers of distance learning experiences.

In chapter 4, on strategic planning, the authors focus on identifying the need for programs or courses and describe the entire distance learning experience planning process. While on-campus leadership education programs are ubiquitous, strategic planning is required to discover if there is a need for distance learning leadership education programs and to plan their content and delivery. The material presented here can readily be applied to any program or course.

In the fifth chapter, on program and course design, the authors provide the technical details of distance learning within the context of planning learning experiences and provide an overview of Copyright and Fair Use standards. Readers would be well advised when reading this chapter to explore their own campus's distance learning technology in order to provide their own examples of the concepts covered in this and the remaining chapters.

Chapter 6 covers assessment of student learning and academic integrity. While not an exhaustive overview of learning assessment, this introduction covers the basics. The section on academic integrity appropriately covers commonly used on-line plagiarism detection tools. Readers should review their campus academic integrity policies and create some direct experience with the plagiarism detection software used on their campus. Firsthand experience is essential since the technology changes rapidly, so what is used this semester may not be what will be used next semester.

Chapter 7 covers online discussions in a clear manner. Readers new to distance learning and online discussions should move slowly through this chapter because the metaphor for face to face and in-class discussion does not translate directly into the distance learning program environment. As with other material,

the reader should seek out experiences to gain a deeper understanding of these technologies and practices.

Chapter 8 covers program evaluation **Apply to SA** puts processes—outcomes model. While not an exhaustive coverage of program evaluation, the authors manage to cover the basics of formative and summative evaluation and are clear in describing how users should employ the information generated by these evaluative processes. The chapter contains specific examples of key performance indicators that can be used with a range of program effects. This list anchors many of the concepts presented to everyday practice.

In chapter 9 the authors cover institution and program accrediting concerns with distance learning. With the assumption that a student is a student, accrediting bodies can legitimately ask how career services, or counseling services, or financial aid services, or student organizations are managed with distance learning students. While this chapter may appear to be the most distant from the day to day practice of student affairs, in fact it may be the most relevant because the way in which services are provided to all students should be thoroughly explored.

Chapter 10 covers course evaluation in a well documented manner and the authors include topics ranging from course improvement to

teaching improvement. Concrete suggestions make this very usable in distance learning and classroom learning contexts.

Chapter 11 contains concise summaries of the material covered in the previous 10 chapters while emphasizing the critical points for distance learning and successfully bringing together the myriad topics that the authors introduced. The appendices provide examples of key elements in the distance learning process and a glossary of key terms.

While this work is designed for a faculty audience not familiar with distance education, it is certainly applicable to the teaching functions of student affairs professionals who are not familiar with distance education. The weakness of the book is the lack of depth that is typical of all introductory texts. Because it is written for faculty there is an emphasis on traditional academic teaching. Consequently student affairs professionals will need to work a little to apply the content covered to meet their distance learning needs.

In summary, this book covers the basics of contemporary distance learning and the material has implications for the practice of student affairs. With the contemporary student affairs emphasis on student learning it is important to fully understand this emerging learning modality and how it affects all members of the campus community.

