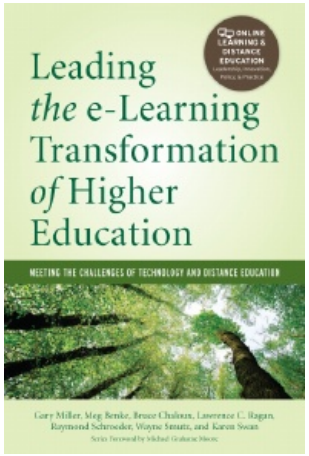


Leading the e-Learning Transformation of Higher Education: Meeting the Challenges of Technology and Distance Education

Miller, Gary; Benke, Meg; Chaloux, Bruce; Ragan, Lawrence C.; Schroeder, Raymond; Smutz, Wayne; and Swan, Karen
Stylus Publishing, Llc., 2014

Book Review

Tags: distance education | e-learning | higher education | technology and teaching

Reviewed by: Richard Nysse, *Luther Seminary*
Date Reviewed: February 12, 2015

This book stretches a reader's view of online learning. The contribution made by these twelve chapters, written individually and jointly, does not come in the form of new theories of learning or innovative models for administering educational institutions in a digital era. Rather, they stretch the reader's view beyond a few courses to address a complete institutional whole. Rarely does the tone become boosterish, despite the word "transformation" in the title. The writers have done the hard work of leading distance education into the mainstream of the institutions they serve. They map the work they have done and the work that still needs to be done. The resulting map is detailed, complex, and extensive. Reading the chapters should scare away anyone who thinks online education is a quick fix for any of the issues confronting higher education. The depth of work chronicled removes naivety.

The seven writers have worked at large institutions, such as Penn State. At first glance teachers and administrators at seminaries with sixty to two hundred students might be inclined to bypass the narratives and guidance offered. That would be a mistake. Schools both large and small need to make policy and procedural decisions, secure technical support, provide pedagogical support for learners and teachers, deploy student services, market programs, and so forth. The list is long. It is as long as the to-do list of any residential program. The business office, the library, campus pastor, the registrar – all of these and more – require attention. What is assumed and hence nearly invisible in residential programs becomes visible and needs to be deliberately addressed in distance education. Once the proximity of teacher and learner in time and/or distance is no longer a given the entire institution is rearranged.

Reconceptualization needs to occur institutionally. Despite the difference in scale, the obligations to learners are very similar.

Where there is a significant difference between the experience of the writers and many readers of this journal is the background of the writers prior to the experiences that are at the center of these chapters; they worked in distance education prior to the web. They worked in programs employing audio and video satellite connections or distributing tapes and CDs to individual distance learners. Spatial and temporal distance between teachers and learners was not unimaginable and the challenges of design and support had been faced. They had already worked in a world not exclusively shaped by residential models. In this respect, the move to online learning was not as abrupt or disorienting, but the change was nevertheless extensive and required continual new learning. The web brought distance learning from the margin to the mainstream of their institutions. In the past, residential students did not need to worry about satellite linkages, but now they do bring their computers into the classroom and social media connects their lives. Temporal and spatial barriers may not be entirely overcome but they clearly are not what they were prior to the mid-1990s. These writers have come to grips with the changes; they have lived them.

The book has a high degree of integration; the writers have worked together in several settings, the most prominent being the Sloan Consortium (Sloan-C, now named the Online Learning Consortium). The book is divided into three parts and works with the "Five Pillars of Quality Online Education" developed by the consortium. In four chapters, Part One addresses the first pillar: "access, which relates to the role of online distance education in an institution's fundamental mission and institutional strategy" (*xii*). Gary Miller, who is one of the authors for three chapters in this section, repeatedly offers wise counsel and sounds cautionary notes. The following typifies his contributions: "[M]ission is mission critical. No institution that has online learning as a significant part of its current or emerging strategy will be successful if the mission of the institution does not clearly recognize it. Too often the online program strategy is not driven by mission" (35). Miller's individually authored chapter ("Leading Change in the Mainstream: A Strategic Approach") is an exemplary model for clear-headed thinking in these highly disruptive times. The past institutional culture has to be understood and respected, not in a perfunctory manner, but as an asset for engaging the unavoidable changes occurring in the environment in which that culture now exists. External forces cannot be scolded away but neither should the future of our institutions merely capitulate to them; rather, they need to be understood and deliberated within our inherited institutional cultures in order to faithfully and effectively serve the stakeholders to which faculty are responsible. The learners are at the center of those responsibilities.

Part Two, in five chapters, addresses “enduring operational excellence.” It is not written in the tone of a how-to manual. None of the five authors use their own institutional experience as a template for others. Learning effectiveness, faculty satisfaction, and student satisfaction are the pillars addressed. Reading these pages, one is impressed by how these leaders have worked within an emerging field; stability is not assumed or sought. There is a clear recognition of the fluidity of the present context, but at the same time there is an emphasis on understanding the current institutional contexts and working institutionally. Leading is not understood in heroically individual terms.

Part Three addresses cost effectiveness and institutional commitment. The goal is to sustain the innovation. Perhaps some readers will be surprised to find a chapter on leading beyond the institution. However, the authors view participation in professional organizations as a constitutive dimension of institutional sustainability. Institutions develop local leadership by supporting faculty and administrative participation in broad networks. Networks generate flexibility for addressing specific actions within an institution’s responsibility to its mission and stakeholders. In fact, this entire book is marked by sharing experiences and expertise to enhance effectiveness; it is decidedly not proprietary in tone or content. The closing chapter is a roundtable discussion responding to over a dozen questions that take up the future of online education. The writers stress an “actionable” future. Here, and throughout the book, these leaders dream with their feet on the ground.

Coupling pragmatic effort with openness to emergent possibilities, the writers have provided a reflective narrative that should inform the work of boards, faculty, administrators, staff, and other stakeholders. Online learning is not merely an add-on; it signals a shift in institutional culture. This book underscores the extent of the cultural shift while being grounded in the day-to-day realities of institutional work.

https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/resources/book_reviews/leading-the-e-learning-transformation-of-higher-education-meeting-the-challenges-of-technology-and-distance-education/