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### Online Education: A Growing Educational Paradigm Looking for An Administrative Structure

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## **Online Education: A Growing Educational Paradigm Looking for An Administrative Structure**

Guest Editor: Tweed W. Ross

No doubt about it: online education, by its various names, is a growing phenomenon in both K-12 and higher education across the country. In 2009, 44 states had online learning programs (iNACOL, 2009). The Sloan Corporation in 2007-2008 estimated 1.3 million K-12 students were enrolled in online learning. (Picciano & Seaman, 2008). Furthermore, not only are numbers of K-12 students engaged in online increasing, there seems to be evidence that the quality of the instruction is as good or better than traditional classroom instruction. According to Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia and Jones "...students in online learning conditions performed better than those receiving face-to-face instruction" (2009, p. ix). For these reasons alone it seems safe to believe that the exponential growth curve in online learning will continue.

There are many factors driving growth in online K-12 education. Some of them may relate to public perceptions of the education offered in traditional schools. Others relate to the availability of technological resources to enable families and students to participate in high quality instruction via computers and the Internet. In 2007 the Pew Research Center reported that 80% of Americans use computers, with a 76% ownership rate (2007). Additionally the Social Data Network reported there were over 80 million broadband subscribers in the United States (Socrata, 2009). If all this technological innovation isn't driving the new emphasis in online learning it is certainly enabling families and students to participate in new educational opportunities. When you couple the access to technology innovation with young peoples' ability to work and play in innovative digital media it is little wonder that online schools are making inroads into traditional face-to-face educational opportunities. "The demand for virtual schools is driven at least in part by fundamental changes in our society and the students who inhabit it." (Davis & Robyler, p. 409)

The new media formats incorporating video, audio, and animation with coupling to social networks that young people throng to are extraordinarily powerful. As Peters (2003) notes, the new technologies provide a 'carrier media' which changes the structure and pedagogy of instruction. To many, old delivery models are just plain boring (Wesch, 2009). Still others see this trend accelerating as more technologically astute students matriculate through the educational system in the next ten years (Gould, Unger, & Ross, 2009). These 'Millennials,' with a different mindset, coupled with different expectations and technology tools, find the lecture method of teaching neither interactive nor attuned to their learning styles (Fishman, 2007; Sherman, 2006).

What appears to be lacking is an administrative structure to the online K-12 learning environment. The type of administrative structure seen in schools today involves a hierarchy of control and

authority from state government through local schools and hired professional administrators. This structure developed slowly during the past 200 years of American education's history. As Beaudoin (2003) who bemoans the lack of leadership roles in distance education in higher education noted, there seems to be the same lack of leadership in K-12 education. Over 40 states have established some sort of online distance education program in the K-12 arena. Still, there is little effort to prepare teachers, administrators, counselors, and other personnel necessary for effective educational environments for a world of online teaching.

Any standard history of American education contains within it a subset of the development of the structure and culture which proscribes and prescribes the administration, leadership, governance and culture of schools (Pulliam & Van Patten, 2007; Snowden & Gorton, 2002; Sergiovanni, Burlingame, Combs & Thurston, 1992; Spring, 2008; Goodlad, 1984). Others have made the argument that because of the digital technology revolution, schooling as it has been formatted for the last two centuries is over (Postman, 1996; Perelman, 1992; Papert, 1992). The purpose of this volume of *Educational Considerations* is not to resolve this issue about the future of education and schooling, but to begin the conversation about how the administration of this new learning environment can be accomplished.

The administration of online education may be radically different compared to what we as educational professionals are attuned to, or it may be an electronic mirror of today's schools. What we can be sure of is it will evolve and develop into some structure for providing educational services to young people, documenting their accomplishments, advising them on learning paths, providing support services, establishing financial models, and developing quality controls. "In the light of increasing demand for virtual courses and the rapid expansion of schools to meet the demand, it is apparent that there will be a parallel need for teachers who are prepared to teach at a distance from their students. There will also be a need for counselors and other support personnel who understand the unique benefits of the new medium and are prepared to meet its needs and requirements" (Davis & Robyler, p. 409). To this we would add all types of leadership positions from principals to chief area administrators. Students recognized the need for learner supports in online instruction, but "unfortunately...very few studies were found that address the specific needs of K-12 students in the form of student supports" (Rice, 2006, p. 435).

In this effort we have enlisted educational professionals from across a range of experiences to offer suggestions and examples of how online educational services and administration may be offered to young people. These professional educators come from varied backgrounds and professional experiences. What they have in common is a belief in beginning the conversation to create the administrative superstructure of K-12 online education. For this purpose we have solicited five outstanding scholars to begin this conversation: Drs. Jesus Abrego and Anita Pankake from University of Texas-Brownsville and University of Texas-Pan-American; Dr. Trudy Salsberry from Kansas State University; Dr. Nikki Currie from Wichita State University;

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Dr. Teresa Miller from Kansas State University and Dr. Michael Ribble from Unified School District #383, Manhattan, Kansas; and Drs. Robert Moody and Regi Wieland from Fort Hays State University.

Appropriately, Drs. Abrego and Pankake lead off this issue with the role of school leaders in K-12 online schools, the challenges they will face and the best practice that will allow them to be effective school leaders in this new environment.

The issues involved in accreditation of online PK-12 schools are vastly different both in scope and tone than those associated with traditional brick and mortar schools. Dr. Salsberry, who has much experience on North Central accreditation teams, outlines how the online environment poses new problems that require new accreditation standards to establish confidence in these schools.

As students negotiate the complex paths to educational accomplishment and maturity public education has recognized the value of professional counselors working closely in schools. Dr. Currie brings her experience as a school counselor to examine the need, pitfalls, and details of how this counseling relationship can be brought to effectively aid students in attaining the stature expected of young adults.

The education profession recognizes the need for high quality professional development of the teaching staff. This has been largely accomplished by workshops, meetings, and advanced study at the school or nearby higher education and service center units. Now that the teachers will be scattered across the land, it is important that this same high quality staff development be available and part of the expectations of the 'new' online teaching faculty. Drs. Miller and Ribble, staff development experts in their own right outline the issues and a process for ensuring this happens.

As a wrap-up to this initial conversation about PK-12 online learning, it is critical that administration and instruction find ways to blur the isolation that students so often feel in online learning environments. Students often feel isolated from both their instructors and each other. Drs. Moody and Wieland from Fort Hays State University, reflectively examine their practice and experience in overcoming this sense of isolation with a model of social presence.

One final note: The field of PK-12 online education is a developing field, and this is only the beginning of the conversation. We encourage our colleagues in the field and in higher education to continue this conversation until the discussion is a full and rich outline of the administration of PK-12 online education.

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