

POLICY AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

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Recently, professors from all public universities in a midwestern state were required to sign a policy statement dealing with intellectual property and the development of online courses. Two ingredients of this policy statement were notable. First, all efforts of faculty were considered “works for hire” and were entirely the property of the university system. Second, failure to sign this statement was to be considered a statement that the professor was intending to resign his or her position. Excluded were textbooks written by professors. The two-page policy statement apparently was prepared by central administration with little or no constructive input by faculty.

Policy is defined as a written course of action, such as a statute, procedure, rule, or regulation, which is adopted to facilitate program development (King, et al., 2000). Distance education policy is the written course of action adopted by institutions to facilitate the development of distance education programs. Policies provide a framework for the operation of distance education. They form a set of agreed-on rules that explain roles and responsibilities. Policies can be compared to laws of navigation, rules of the road, or language syntax. They provide a standard method of operation, such as “no wake zone”, “keep to the right”, or “subject and verb must match”. Poli-

cies give structure to unstructured events and are a natural step in the adoption of an innovation, such as distance education. One key indicator that distance education is moving into the mainstream is the increased emphasis on the need for policies to guide its effective growth.

Berge (1998), and Gellman-Danley and Fetzner (1998) have proposed models for distance education policy. These models have been reported and evaluated a number of times in the literature (King, et al., 2000; King et al., 1998), and seem to provide a useful framework for an investigation of distance education policy.

POLICY CATEGORIES

Often in the literature, policies are divided into seven categories, or areas (King, et al., 2000; Gellman-Danley & Fetzner, 1998).

Academic

The key issues in this area deal with academic calendars, accreditation of programs, course quality, course and program evaluation, Carnegie units, grading, admission, and curriculum review and approval processes.

Fiscal, Geographic, Governance

The key issues in this area deal with tuition rates, special fees, full time equivalencies, state mandated regulations related to funding, service area limitations, out-of-district versus in-district relationships, consortia agreements, contracts with collaborating organizations, board oversight, administration cost, and tuition disbursement.

Faculty

The key issues in this area deal with compensation and workloads, design and development incentives, staff development, faculty support, faculty evaluation, intellectual freedom, and union contracts.

Legal

The key issues in this area deal with intellectual property agreements, copyright, and faculty/student/institutional liability.

Student

The key issues in this area deal with student support, academic advising, counseling, library services, student training, financial aid, testing and assessment, access to resources, equipment requirements, and privacy.

Technical

The key issues in this area deal with system reliability, connectivity, technical support, hardware/software, and access.

Philosophical

This key issues in this area deal with the acceptance of distance education based on a clear understanding of the approach, organizational values and mission, and visions statements.

Integrated policies for distance education are preferred (King, et al., 1998). In other words, policies that provide guidance and direction to the educational systems should seamlessly include and incorporate the concept of distant delivery of instruction. Students should be defined by their enrollment in a course or program, not by whether they are distant or local learners (Simonson, 2003). Initially, distance education policies will probably need to be separate from existing policies. Ultimately, they should be integrated to indicate that distance education is a routine and regularly occurring component of the educational enterprise. Policies are merely tools to facilitate program integrity.

This journal would welcome scholarly contributions dealing with policy as it relates to distance education. The organizational approach presented above could be the basis for articles, or some alternative plan could be used. Of special interest would be articles from professors expected to sign intellectual property statements such as the one referred to in the first paragraph.

EDITOR'S NOTE

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