

BOOK REVIEW

Lucy Green, *Book Review Editor*

***Leading the e-Learning Transformation of Higher Education: Meeting the Challenges of Technology and Distance Education*, by Gary Miller, Meg Benke, Bruce Chaloux, Lawrence C. Ragan, Raymond Schroeder, Wayne Smutz, and Karen Swan**

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Leading the e-Learning Transformation of Higher Education: Meeting the Challenges of Technology and Distance Education, by Miller, Benke, Chaloux, Ragan, Schroeder, Smutz, and Swan, seven pioneers and leaders in higher education online learning, is a welcome and valuable contribution to e-learning literature. At a time when systemic change is being called for in higher education, institutional leaders are realizing that they must enter the e-learning environment or run the risk of being left behind. In a recent report on the state of online education, Allen and

Seaman (2014) noted that the number of students taking at least one online course in higher education institutions across the United States now totals 7.1 million. In this same report, the proportion of chief academic leaders who indicated online education is critical to their long-term strategy is at 66%. At the same time, Gaytan (2009), in a study of the impact of colleges' institutional contexts on their approaches to online education, found that colleges' structures for online education did not necessarily support and promote their learning outcomes.

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The Quarterly Review of Distance Education, Volume 15(2), 2014, pp. 61–66
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ISSN 1528-3518
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This transformative time in higher education calls for strong leadership by individuals who can help develop the strategic changes needed to bring e-learning into the higher education institutional mainstream in a way that supports and promotes student learning outcomes. The majority of research currently published in the online learning literature has focused at the micro level on teaching and learning from the perspectives of students and faculty. Very little research is available in the scholarly literature, however, that looks at the macro level organizational goals and strategic plans necessary to develop and sustain an e-learning infrastructure. Written in an easily readable, yet professional tone, *Leading the e-Learning Transformation* fills an important void in the literature by addressing, on a macro level, how to integrate e-learning into the higher education institutional mainstream in a way that addresses the importance of sustainability as a key to success.

The authors, who collectively describe themselves as the first generation of e-learning leaders, explain that the purpose of this book is, “to provide insights into the challenges facing the field for a generation of emerging leaders who can expect that much of their careers will be devoted to continuing this transformation” (p. xi). Aptly so, this book focuses on the role of the online distance education leader in steering change in the larger institutional context. Throughout the course of 12 chapters, the authors carefully address three overarching themes: leading change, ensuring operational excellence, and sustaining the innovation. These themes are addressed in a manner that is reflective of the Five Pillars of Quality Online Education developed by Frank Mayadas for the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation: learning effectiveness, scale (cost-effectiveness and institutional commitment), access, faculty satisfaction, and student satisfaction (Moore, 2002). Rather than serve as a primer on how to become an e-learning leader, the authors provide valuable insights, lessons learned, key concepts, and a vision for the future that are critical for bringing about strategic change

within higher education. Though the authors do a thorough job outlining the “insights into the challenges facing the field” as stated in the book’s purpose, newly emerging e-learning leaders may further benefit from additional resources that outline the steps necessary to bring about strategic change.

The first theme of the book, leading change, is discussed throughout the first four chapters and addresses the important concepts required to be a change agent within the broader higher education institutional context. The authors do a nice job setting the stage for current, new, and emerging e-learning leaders by bringing to light the skills, attitudes, values, scope, and abilities necessary to bring about change. Grounding e-learning within the historical context of distance education, the authors artfully articulate how the age in which we currently exist is a knowledge society that allows information to bring people and ideas together in new ways. This shift, the authors claim, will significantly impact education at all levels. At the same time, public institutions across the nation are experiencing reduced state funding, a rise in tuition and fees, and are being tasked to be more efficient and effective. The authors make a convincing argument that many higher education institutions are not currently equipped to deal with these challenges, thus creating an opportunity for online learning to enter the mainstream of higher education as a means by which to address these critical issues. This transformation requires a new generation of e-learning leaders who are prepared to lead higher education institutions into this new era.

Successful e-learning leaders, the authors explain, must take a strategic approach that will allow them to understand the broader educational environment in which they work. The authors address an important trend often glossed over in the literature about misconceptions surrounding the “money making” potential that e-learning can provide. Rather than allow e-learning to be viewed as a “cash cow” for the university, the authors argue that e-learning leaders must, instead, ensure that

e-learning is viewed as an “academic innovation” that is valued as a key component of the social organization of the academic mainstream (p. 39). The authors highlight findings from a recent study of leadership factors that contribute to successful e-learning initiatives at public research universities (McCarthy & Samors, 2009). These factors include strategic planning, designing the organizational structure, developing sustainable funding and allocating institutional resources, and effective leadership communication of institutional plans and decisions. Because there is no single “best way” to lead the e-learning transformation, the authors were wise in their selection of five very different institutions with highly successful online learning programs to illustrate how organizational structures shape e-learning leadership opportunities and restrictions. The institutions include a major research land-grant university (The Pennsylvania State University World Campus), a small regional state university (University of Illinois at Springfield), a large state college with an adult-focused mission (Empire State College), a large 2-year community college online-only institution (Rio Salado College), and a large for-profit online-only institution (American Public University System). From these institutions, common elements emerged that allowed the authors to develop a useful framework to guide online learning leaders as they steer e-learning into the institutional mainstream culture.

The second theme of *Leading the e-Learning Transformation*, ensuring operational excellence, is addressed throughout chapters five through nine. These chapters are particularly strong and have the appropriate level of depth to steer an emerging e-leader into strategic action. Within these chapters, learning effectiveness, faculty satisfaction, and student satisfaction are three key factors of strategic, operational excellence that are highlighted from a perspective that moves away from a focus on operational details. Instead, the authors examine these critical issues by framing them within the larger, institutional context. Included within these chapters is a

discussion about how to integrate the operating platform (such as a learning management system) into the campus infrastructure in a way that allows online learning to be a part of the educational mainstream, regardless of whether a learner is campus based or learning from a distance. Throughout these chapters, the reader will find the information presented here to be practical and in-depth, as the authors review major operational points and implications for e-learning leadership as well as recommendations for operational and strategic excellence.

Within Chapter 5, evidence is reviewed that illustrates that when online courses are built and taught using sound pedagogy grounded in constructivist principles that are centered around the learner, knowledge, assessment, and community, student learning can meet or exceed that which occurs in traditional courses. Despite these findings, there is a great deal of skepticism among university administrators and faculty members about the quality of instruction that can occur online (Graham & Jones, 2011; Ulmer, Watson, & Derby, 2007). Because the effectiveness of e-learning remains under debate, it was appreciated that the authors stressed the importance that e-learning leaders not only become conversant about e-learning in general, but are particularly knowledgeable about their own contexts for e-learning through the collection and analysis of data on the inputs, processes, and outcomes of e-learning at their institutions. Moving university administrators and faculty toward acceptance of the viability and value of e-learning is expected to be a major hurdle for e-learning leaders, at least during the early stages of transformation; thus, content addressed throughout this chapter is a critical “must read,” regardless of one’s role in e-learning.

A second critical component required for e-learning operational excellence, the instructor’s role, has gained increasing attention throughout the scholarly literature. For institutional leaders, support of faculty in the online learning context is twofold. Since a large number of institutional faculty have little or no experience either learning or teaching online, a

different set of teaching skills and competencies must be developed to ensure both faculty and learner success. In a practical, meaningful fashion, the authors discuss 10 important themes that they feel encompass good practice for faculty. At the same time, an institutional level support infrastructure must be established for faculty that both ensures course design and teaching needs are met, while creating an academic culture that allows faculty to feel supported, respected, and professionally satisfied. The authors also explain that the institutional e-learning leader has much to bear in this realm as new policies and infrastructures are established that attend to issues of faculty roles and responsibilities, teaching loads, rewards, promotion and tenure, professional development, and fiscal matters. While the authors do not explicitly prescribe a formula for how to create this infrastructure, they do a nice job successfully addressing critical elements for the emerging and current e-learning leaders and online faculty to consider as infrastructures are established.

Equally as important as the instructor's role, the authors discuss the need for e-learning leaders to develop a holistic understanding of the distance learner and ensure that the necessary student support infrastructures are developed that promote the success and retention of these individuals. Because designated student support services for online learners are critical to a university's long-term vision and sustainability, I appreciated the authors' careful attention to student needs throughout this section of the text. Rather than trying to fit online student support into traditional, on-campus student services, the authors make a strong and necessary argument for a student-centered approach that requires advocacy for a centralized student services function that is actively involved in institutional practices across the campus community. Critical to long-term sustainability, e-learning leaders must ensure online students have easy access to formal and informal support services that recognize the unique needs of learners who often work in physical isolation apart from the traditional campus commu-

nity. If an emerging e-learning leader had time to read only a portion of the book, it is the chapters pertaining to faculty role and student support that are recommended, as these are critical elements required for successful integration of e-learning into higher education.

In the emerging new mainstream of higher education, the Internet and online technology have blurred the lines between distance education and traditional, campus based education. The authors do an excellent job articulating the need for technology infrastructures that can support not only fully online distance courses, but web-enhanced (online elements are included in a course) and hybrid courses (certain number of classroom meetings are replaced with online components) as well. As technology integration has become mainstream practice for faculty and students, the authors rightfully argue that it is essential for e-learning leaders to develop a strategy for dealing with policies that arise in the distance education arena that have implications for the mainstream and vice versa. While distance education units have historically been considered ancillary to the campus, the e-learning leader must ensure that online distance education is considered a core element of the institution and a key element in institutional strategic planning. While effective e-learning leadership requires expertise in front-line operations, including technical infrastructure and student and faculty support, the authors make a sound argument that strategic leadership is required in order to bring e-learning into the mainstream of institutional culture. They clearly convey how leaders can move beyond operational aspects of e-learning leadership to create a strategic context that includes both a vision of successful online learning and the ability to bring the vision into reality.

In the final chapters of *Leading the e-Learning Transformation*, the authors address the third theme, sustaining the innovation. The authors make a convincing argument throughout these chapters that the universal access to education made possible through e-learning cannot be sustained without change

in federal, state, and institutional policies that place greater emphasis on the importance of e-learning. The authors highlight five policy areas that have emerged as barriers to e-learning: tuition increases, transfer credit policies, state and campus budgeting and allocation policies, federal and state financial aid policies, and student support services. It is the role of institutional leaders, the authors stress, to advocate for e-learning in a way that promotes these necessary policy changes. This type of advocacy, they explain, requires e-learning leaders to be knowledgeable about current policy issues in higher education, actively engaged in the policy arena, proactive rather than reactive, and understand the importance of educating the policymakers about the rapid growth, acceptance, and increasing quality of e-learning. Though the authors gave well-placed emphasis to the e-learning leader's role in influencing policy both within and beyond the institution, they could have, perhaps, given greater attention to the need for e-learning leaders to educate their own institutions' senior leadership, students, faculty, and members of the public about these important issues and ensure they too become e-learning advocates in the policy arena.

Finally, the authors stress the importance of "leading beyond the institution." Though they did not give as much attention to this role of leadership as they gave to other elements of e-learning leadership, I appreciated their call for e-learning leaders to not only raise the visibility of e-learning, but that they do so in a way that justifies resources and positively influences policy and accreditation decisions at a broader level. This type of leadership, the authors explain, requires personal engagement in professional associations, accreditation activities, and regional or state distance learning consortia. Further, the authors' acknowledgement of the powerful role that faculty can play in strategic e-learning leadership was well placed. Institutional e-learning leaders, the authors explain, must realize the value of fac-

ulty leaders within one's own institution and encourage their participation in strategic opportunities to represent the faculty perspective in distance learning policy decision making, become active in distance learning professional associations, and serve as peer leaders in the professional development of other faculty. Bringing about a strategic e-learning transformation requires a mobilization of e-learning advocates who range from scholars, practitioners, operational leaders, to visionaries.

Though the book is a thoughtful and interesting read from start to finish, it is written in a manner which allows the reader to "pick and choose" sections to read and return to time and again. Though seasoned e-learning leaders may find that this book provides some new insights, I recommend this text primarily to new e-learning leaders. Since many e-learning leaders are emerging from operational roles within institutions, this book may be particularly helpful to them as a resource with which to become conversant in the many elements of e-learning that are essential for strategic change. In addition, faculty in instructional roles may find Chapters 5 through 7, which address important aspects of operational excellence relating to instructor role and student support, to be particularly helpful.

Leading the e-Learning Transformation of Higher Education is a thoughtful, inspiring book that creates a strong argument for taking strategic action to integrate e-learning into the core of higher education. In a field that has primarily focused on micro level aspects of e-learning, this book makes a significant contribution to the field by addressing the macro level strategic leadership required in the field during these transformative times in higher education. Though this book is not an instructional primer that provides step-by-step instructions on how to lead the e-learning transformation, the insights shared by the seven authors are invaluable for the next generation of e-learning leaders.

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