



DISTANCE LEARNING

... For Educators, Trainers, and Leaders

*In this
issue the
spotlight is on*

**The Story of
Network
Nebraska**

ARTICLES

- ▲ Constructing the 39th Statewide Network:
The Story of Network Nebraska
- ▲ AT A DISTANCE: An Instructional Design
Framework for Distance Education
- ▲ The Importance of Accreditation and
Infrastructure for Online Schools
- ▲ Going Global: Perils and Promises for
Open and Distance Education
- ▲ Educational Gaming: Interactive
Edutainment
- ▲ Create an Online Lesson in Less Than an
Hour Using SoftChalk LessonBuilder
- ▲ Technology in Motion: The University of
Montevallo's Regional Research and
Education Inservice Center
- ▲ The Roles of Contemporary Faculty,
Unbundled
- ▲ The LCMS and the Evolution of Corporate
Training
- ▲ Distance Learning Opportunities: Expanding
Cognitive Landscapes

COLUMNS

- ▲ Ends and Means
- ▲ And Finally ...

The Importance of Accreditation and Infrastructure for Online Schools

Margaret G. Morabito

PURPOSE

This article provides an integration of the author's 1997-1998 ERIC Digest articles, "Educational Administration in the Global Community" and "Foundations of Distance Education," and an update on the evolution of CALCampus, an online distance learning school that was a pioneer in the field when it first appeared online in 1986 (Morabito,

1997, 1998). CALCampus was presented in this author's dissertation, *Online Distance Education: Historical Perspective and Practical Application*, as an example of the effectiveness of online distance learning (Morabito, 2008). This article serves to show a portion of the evolution of CALCampus since 1997 and some of the leadership tasks needed to succeed in an ever-growing world of online schools.

Leadership in this school has involved decision making and actions that have shown a willingness to move into new territory while operating within a sphere of uncertain outcomes. Although the school has always experienced a certain level of success, this was possible only because its leadership has been able to contend with many changes in this still relatively new field of education and has been able to modify its organizational structure when needed. In the early decades, the 1980s and 1990s, the school was under the leadership of the director with input from faculty and academic department heads. As we entered the twenty-first century, the school leadership evolved to include a three-member school committee. In order for the school to succeed, the leadership has had to be willing to change itself, as well as to be an agent of change, one of 21



Margaret G. Morabito, Director, CALCampus,
P.O. Box 132, Rindge, NH 03461.
Telephone: (603) 899-2388.
E-mail: director@calcampus.com

responsibilities discussed in *School Leadership That Works* (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005).

While there have been many changes to CALCampus, this article will concentrate on two areas of school development that address needs crucial to the survival and advancement of an online distance learning school: accreditation and instructional infrastructure. Both areas serve to illustrate leadership challenges impacting private, independent online schools in the twenty-first century. This article relates sequences of events and specific thoughts, motivations, and comments about the events as they occurred over the past decade from a firsthand perspective as the top administrator of an international online school.

PUBLIC DEMAND FOR ACCREDITATION AND/OR STATE APPROVAL FOR ONLINE SCHOOLS

In the closing years of the last century, the public came online in greater numbers than in prior years and there was a growing demand for distance learning opportunities to be provided through online divisions of traditional schools and through online distance learning schools. Within nontraditional higher education (including, but not exclusively, online schooling), data showed substantial growth by the end of the century. In 1988, Bear listed over 500 schools and programs that offered nontraditional college degrees; by 1998, this list had grown to over 1,600 higher education schools and programs (Bear, 1988; Bear & Bear, 1998). Concurrently, there was growing public pressure on online schools and other nontraditional schools to show quality comparable to traditional schools that were already accredited.

The general public learned from online advice-givers, both then and today, that accreditation was the main sign of a reputable online school. On the About.com Web site, the general public is warned that

"Accreditation is one of the most important factors in choosing an online school. Make sure that your school is accredited by the right agencies" (About.com: Distance Learning, n.d.). This is one of dozens, if not hundreds, of Web sites that inform parents and students about the need for online school accreditation. Although educational leaders know that accreditation is a voluntary process and know that the U.S. Department of Education does not accredit schools, the public believes that accreditation is mandatory, does not know which accrediting agency is required for their particular needs, and does not understand that certain schools will only fit within an individual state's Department of Education approval, which also serves as a sign of quality and legitimacy (Overview of Accreditation, U.S. Department of Education). Despite this situation, these online advice-giving sites serve a valid purpose and their impact has been demonstrated by requests from prospective students for the accreditation status of online schools before signing up for classes, thereby motivating many online schools, both secondary and postsecondary, to seek some kind of accreditation or state approval.

The problem in the 1990s, and unknown to the public, was that most states and accrediting agencies did not have rules governing the licensing or accreditation of online schools. In 1994, Moore wrote: "At the regional level, the accreditation process still uses campus-based learning, faculty-centered teaching, and classroom-based instruction as the bases for reviewing and evaluating programs.... At the state level, long-established mechanisms drive continuous investments in bricks-and-mortar education" (para. 3). There was a disconnect between public perceptions of unaccredited online schools and the reality of a lack of accreditation possibilities available to online schools from the established accreditors and states. This hindered online schools from being able to meet

public expectations, no matter how good the quality of their courses and faculty.

By 1997, CALCampus had been in operation totally online for over 10 years, serving both secondary and college level students. At that time, many of the established accreditors recognized by the U.S. Department of Education would allow only a small percentage of a school to be offered through online distance learning; this requirement alone eliminated our school from eligibility. Although we provided a traditional curriculum and highly academic courses, we still had to wait for the educational establishment to catch up. We were at that time located in New York state, a state that did not license online schools at all, and when we searched for accrediting agencies that might accredit our online school, we could not find one that matched our situation. First, we served two different levels of students that traditionally fell into two different levels of accrediting agencies; and, second, we were 100% online by design, something for which most established accreditors were not ready. Furthermore, being a small school, we were also looking for an accrediting agency that would be financially affordable.

Spurred by public requests for accreditation and a desire for school improvement by the administration, CALCampus continued its search for a way to be recognized by the educational community. Not finding an appropriate match from the regional accreditors, we sought state approval. In 2001, we found the state of Wyoming Department of Education, Post Secondary Proprietary School Department, which had implemented licensing laws for nondegree granting distance learning schools. Wyoming did not require a physical presence in their state, so this gave us an opportunity to become state-licensed without relocating (Wyoming Private Schools Licensing, n.d.).

We continued to search for other states that would license and approve our school.

New Hampshire was our state of origin, but it did not yet have rules for our kind of school. Eventually, New Hampshire developed licensing rules for online schools and, in 2003, we were able to apply for and earn state approval from the New Hampshire Postsecondary Education Commission (n.d.). New Hampshire had a physical residency requirement, which we complied with although we were in New York, with our goal being to relocate to New Hampshire. In 2005, we accomplished the move to New Hampshire and are now in our own building. In 2005, we discontinued our Wyoming license.

While Wyoming had covered our entire school, including our adult high school diploma program, our New Hampshire licensing in 2003 covered only our postsecondary courses and programs. Our search continued for accreditation or state approval to cover our high school program. In 2004, the National Association of Private Schools, located in Oklahoma, accredited our high school courses and diploma program without requiring that we move the school to their state. This also expanded our age group market, so that the high school diploma was no longer specifically for adults. Since we needed two different organizations to approve our two levels of instruction, high school and nondegree granting college/postsecondary, we evolved into more clearly delineating between our high school and our postsecondary divisions.

By this time, online education was clearly becoming mainstream and was being adopted by many traditional brick and mortar institutions. We could see firsthand the growing demand from students, both postsecondary and high school, for online courses. Allen and Seaman (2007) report that from 2002 through 2006, statistical data bears this out. Between these years, online enrollments grew substantially faster than overall higher education enrollments: in the fall of 2002, there were 1,602,970 students taking at least one

online course, but by the fall of 2006, this number had grown to 3,488,381. This is more than 100% growth in only 4 years. Furthermore, by this time, high schools were also becoming more involved with online education. A 2007 survey by the Sloan Consortium (Picciano & Seaman, 2007) presented results showing that, although there was less activity within K-12 schools than in higher educational institutions, there was growth in this level of schooling with the expectation of future growth. Cited in this study were estimates that 40,000 to 50,000 students enrolled in online courses in 2001, while by 2005-2006, the estimate had grown closer to 700,000. This is a tremendous increase within a short period of time.

This growing demand from students within the established educational communities led us to pursue an even higher level of accreditation and recognition, to give our entire school more acceptance within the United States and the international educational community. We looked again at the regional accrediting agencies who, by 2005, had started to recognize online schools. Our natural choice, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, still did not have rules governing online schools. In order to seek regional accreditation to cover our entire school, we had to go outside of our region. This led us to the Commission on International and Trans-Regional Accreditation (CITA). With CITA, we would also be able to earn regional accreditation for our entire school through one of its alliance members, the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI). In 2006, we applied and became a candidate school and in September of 2007, CALCampus High School and Postsecondary achieved dual accreditation with CITA and NCA CASI.

This journey of over 20 years resulted in CALCampus achieving regional, national, and international accreditation, as well as state approval. The story illustrates the

organizational challenges facing the leaders of small private online schools in the twenty-first century to fulfill expectations of an international educational community and the need to patiently pursue the tasks needed for school survival and improvement.

INFRASTRUCTURE OF AN ONLINE SCHOOL

On an operational level, online schools face another major task in fulfilling the expectations of online students: effective and user-friendly instructional infrastructure. Infrastructure is comprised of four areas: hardware, content/software, technical support, and ancillary materials and resources (Kansas National Education Association, n.d.). An online school requires frequent updating of its infrastructure, in particular the hardware and software used to provide the underlying course management system, a set of authenticated server applications designed to function together in providing course content, assessment tools, and interactive communication tools. In the online *Guide to Online High School Courses*, the National Education Association (n.d.) provides advice to the public when searching for an online high school: "the technical infrastructure supporting the online course should provide the necessary tools for instruction and interactivity. The technology ... should work reliably, simply, and economically" (para. 19).

While one would assume that online course management systems are new creations, many universities and secondary schools are using some core tools that have been available since 1986; however, newer course management systems have been designed specifically for the school market and made available through the Internet. When CALCampus began in 1986, there was no Internet available to the public. Online users joined large, public-access online networks and participated only

with other members of the same network. CALCampus was originally designed as an online school, adapting the tools that were available on the networks for educational purposes. These included real-time, synchronous classrooms, supported by asynchronous communication tools in the form of message boards and e-mail. Teachers provided course materials through downloadable online libraries. The school also had an online testing center, programmed by our in-house programmer, through which students could take online quizzes for the courses or for supplemental study. The school was designed so that group classes met at predetermined times each week in specific rooms within the online campus. This basic infrastructure of server applications, although ancient, is similar to what we see in 2008 at many schools that have adopted distance learning through the Internet.

By early 1995, although the Internet was fairly new for the mainstream public, our school chose to move onto the Internet with our own domain (www.calcampus.com). We bought the equipment and software needed for the school infrastructure. There were no Web-based course management systems as we see today. Instead, we used an applications server, similar to a bulletin board system, that was accessible via the Internet. The hardware and software that were needed to operate the applications server were physically located and maintained in-house by CALCampus. Our applications server software, Worldgroup, was produced by Galacti-comm. The system itself was aimed at a market of bulletin board users; however, we took the system and adapted it to be an educational delivery system. Originally, in 1995, it was mainly a text-based system that was accessed via Telnet through the Internet. It also had Internet Relay Chat (IRC) for supplemental online chat and file transfer protocol (FTP) for quickly downloading files. In 1996, Galacti-comm introduced a graphical user interface for

Worldgroup that required a downloadable plugin. By 1997, the Worldgroup set of server applications was being modified to become Web-based, which allowed users to access certain applications with standard Web browsers using HTTP instructions. This made accessibility easier for online users who knew nothing about Telnet, IRC, or FTP, while also avoiding the requirement of a downloadable plugin. However, support for Worldgroup ended, and no significant advancements were provided by the company after 2002.

As a result, in 2002, we had a course management system that provided the core tools seen in many present-day online schools; however, the system was not originally designed for school use, so there were certain features lacking. For example, it lacked the built-in utilities for teachers to easily create and modify course Web sites without needing to know HTML programming. While we did develop and use a few course Web sites, their production was too time-consuming and required a lot of in-house work, so the majority of courses continued using download libraries that the Worldgroup server provided.

The newer course management systems, such as BlackBoard (www.blackboard.com) and the open-source Moodle (www.moodle.org), are well-known examples of modern course management systems that provide advancements to what CALCampus has been using. They provide user-friendly methods of providing course content, creating and giving online quizzes, submitting homework assignments by students, retrieving homework by teachers, reporting and tracking online test results, and recording and updating assignment and course grades. The systems we see today are a great improvement because they are designed specifically for schools using the Web and provide the various tools in more user-friendly ways, thereby encouraging their use by teachers and students. They also are being upgraded continually. The online

infrastructure at CALCampus from 1995 until the early twenty-first century was effective, but it reached a point where it was not able to be easily modified or updated. In addition, as more online schools and online divisions of traditional schools came into being in the early 2000s, we saw the emergence of new student and teacher expectations that were not there before, therefore urging us onward.

Today, there is much competition in the online school arena and students are more knowledgeable about online learning. Howell, Williams, and Lindsay (2003) discussed 32 trends affecting distance education; among these is the fact that students are shopping around for online courses that can be used to fill needs in their own degree programs. These students have been exposed to a variety of course management systems. While there is no single correct way to provide online learning, there has developed a level of student expectation, especially from those coming from schools using current course management systems, such as Blackboard and Moodle. Many students today expect to use a Web-based school system that provides classrooms, message boards, e-mail, library files, quiz centers, and homework submission utilities in one easy-to-use Web-browser format. Many teachers today also expect this kind of modern course management system, especially for facilitating Web-based course development.

As an old school in relation to all online schools, CALCampus has had to continually advance technologically. In 2007, when we prepared our accreditation self-study for CITA, we needed to look closely at what we were doing and where we were going technologically; this was one of CITA's seven standards for accreditation (CITA, 2006). The need for a technology plan and a reliable technology delivery system is also stated as one of the institutional support benchmarks discussed by the Institute For Higher Education Policy (Merisotis & Phipps, 2000). In developing

our updated technology plan, we decided that the time had come to take advantage of one of the newer Web-based course management systems. Considering features and affordability, we decided to adopt the open-source Moodle, a system that has an international following and widespread support. In 2008, CALCampus transferred over to this new system, which provides easier access by teachers and students to all aspects of our online campus, more tools for learning and assessments, an easier online course development interface, administrative tracking of student progress, as well as training documentation for our teachers.

The need for updated instructional infrastructure has required an ongoing willingness on the part of the school's leadership to make changes. Gangel (1997) discussed the fear of change and the innate desire to maintain the status quo as a major cause of ineffective decision making by organizational leaders. In the world of online schools, organizational leaders do not have the luxury and time to relish past successes. In order to remain competitive in this technology-driven world, educational leaders must take bold steps to keep their schools progressive and responsive to students' needs.

IN CONCLUSION

The foundational improvements discussed in this paper, accreditation and instructional infrastructure, are only two keys to the survival and progress of an online school today. As the entire educational community becomes more knowledgeable and experienced with online learning and as the surge in Internet-based learning grows, more demands are being placed on leaders of online schools to keep up with changes needed to successfully compete in a constantly evolving market. CALCampus is one example of an online school that has continued to evolve over

time to serve the needs and expectations of its students.

REFERENCES

- About.com. (n.d.). *Distance learning. Accreditation info*. Retrieved January 12, 2008, from <http://distancelearn.about.com/od/accreditationinfo/a/accreditation1.htm>
- Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2007). *Online nation: Five years of growth in online learning*. Needham, MA: Sloan Consortium.
- Bear, J. (1988). *Bear's guide to earning non-traditional college degrees* (10th ed.). Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press.
- Bear, J. B., & Bear, M. P. (1998). *Bears' guide to earning degrees nontraditionally* (12th ed.). Benecia, CA: C and B.
- Blackboard. (n.d.). Retrieved January 12, 2008, from <http://www.blackboard.com>
- Commission on International and Trans-Regional Accreditation. (2006). *Standards for accreditation, division of schools—Distance education, standard 5.3*. Retrieved January 12, 2008, from http://citashools.org/pdf/de_standards_09-06.pdf
- Gangel, K. O. (1997). *Team leadership in Christian ministry*. Chicago: Moody Press.
- Howell, S. L., Williams, P. B., & Lindsay, N. K. (2003). Thirty-two trends affecting distance education: An informed foundation for strategic planning. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, 6(3). Retrieved January 11, 2008 from <http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdl/fall63/howell63.html>
- Kansas National Education Association. (2008). *Infrastructure to support online education*. Retrieved January 9, 2008, from http://ks.nea.org/qualityschools/distancelearning/dist_infra.html
- Marzano, R., Waters, T., & McNulty, B. (2005). *School leadership that works: From research to results*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Merisotis, J. P., & Phipps, R. A. (2000, May). Quality on the line: Benchmarks for success in Internet-based distance education. *Institute for Higher Education Policy*. Retrieved January 11, 2008, from <http://www.ihep.org/Publications/publications-detail.cfm?id=69>
- Moodle. (n.d.). Retrieved January 12, 2008, from <http://moodle.org>
- Moore, M. G. (1994). Administrative barriers to adoption of distance education. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, 8(3), 1-4.
- Morabito, M. G. (1997). Foundations of distance education. *ERIC Digest*. ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED412357.
- Morabito, M. G. (1998). Educational administration in the global community. *ERIC Digest*. ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED417474 (1998-01-15).
- Morabito, M. G. (2008). *Online distance education: Historical perspective and practical application*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Akamai University, Hilo, HI.
- National Association of Private Schools. (n.d.). Retrieved January 12, 2008, from <http://napsaccreditation.com/>
- National Education Association. (n.d.). *Guide to online high school courses*. Retrieved January 16, 2008, from <http://www.nea.org/technology/onlinecourseguide.html>
- New Hampshire Postsecondary Education Commission. (n.d.). *Title XV education. Chapter 188-D: Postsecondary Education Commission. Regulation of private postsecondary career schools, 188-D:19*. Retrieved January 12, 2008, from <http://www.gencourt.state.nh.us/rsa/html/XV/188-D/188-D-19.htm>
- North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement. (n.d.). Retrieved January 12, 2008, from <http://www.ncacasi.org>
- Picciano, A. G., & Seaman, J. (2007). *K-12 online learning: A survey of U.S. school district administrators*. Needham, MA: Sloan Consortium.
- U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). *Financial aid for postsecondary students. Accreditation in the United States: Overview of accreditation*. Retrieved January 12, 2008, from <http://www.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/accreditation.html#Overview>
- Wyoming Department of Education. (n.d.). *Private school licensing. Non-degree granting; Chapter 1: W.S. 21-2-401 through 21-2-407. 2001*. Retrieved January 18, 2001, from http://www.k12.wy.us/higher_ed/applications.html and retrieved January 12, 2008, from www.k12.wy.us/F/psl/proprietary.pdf