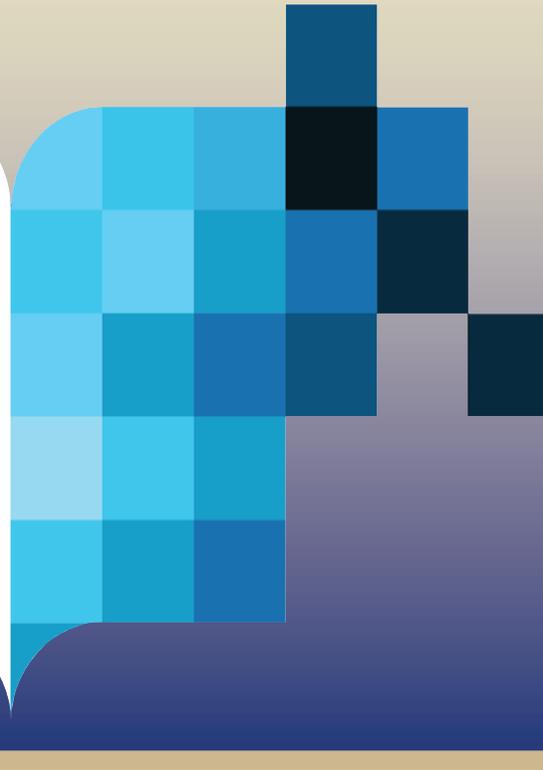# Administrative Essentials for Online Programs

Delivering programs online, whether at the elementary, secondary, or tertiary level, is a significant undertaking. This practical overview examines several areas administrators should consider as they set up or seek to improve online courses and programs offered by their schools. Several questions are provided to spark thinking, with additional resources referenced for further reading.

Administrators and education stakeholders involved in decision-making should reflect on a number of essential components before making a decision about offering online education: the alignment of online delivery to the school's mission of providing Adventist education; the need to create an online learning-support unit; the design of the program; and the essential student services.

Ensuring That Online Delivery Aligns With Your School's Mission

Diving into offering online courses and programs should be more than embracing a new fad; it should be a well-planned experience that tightly aligns with the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist school.[1] Questions to consider include the following: Does online delivery match the institution's strategic plans and goals? Does it fit into the institution's technology plan?[2] The decision to offer online courses or programs should not be seen as a way to increase revenue quickly.

Administrators must ensure that their planning to deliver education online includes strategies to overcome resistance to change with listening, patience, and tolerance.[3] They should review the school's culture and processes to ensure that the learning environment is ready for online education. For example, collecting and analyzing institutional data, conducting needs assessments, conducting survey research or forming focus groups to gather information, and assessing organizational processes are all strategies for evaluating what is taking place on campus and how the environment might respond to change.[4]

Staffing an Online Support Department

To plan for success, create a centralized unit responsible for supporting distance education.[5] This unit should interact and work with the rest of the institution rather than function as an independent silo. Consider whether to outsource support for online education or develop the talent already present in the school.[6] Areas to consider when developing resources include staffing, training for teachers new to online teaching, tech-

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nology support, instructional design support, marketing, and student services. Find or develop staff with training in the delivery of online and distance education.[7] Teachers will need support, clear expectations, and bite-sized training as they develop and teach online courses.[8] (See the article by La Ronda Forsey on page 11 in this issue for more detail on supporting teachers.)

Set realistic expectations for the amount of work and the time involved in creating, writing, and developing an online course, as well as teaching online. For example, will there be policies that clearly define who legally owns online course content developed by teachers (whether the teacher or the school)? Who can update the material? How often? How will contract or adjunct teachers be trained or brought on board? Who will regulate student-teacher ratios, and how will this be done?

How will teachers and students be supported? What is the plan for hiring and funding support staff, in ad-dition to technology support? Some schools assign one or more persons to support both teachers and students. For example, Montemorelos University (Mexico) has a UMVirtual faculty-and-student-support person. (See the article by Lorena Neria de Girarte in the April-June 2018 issue.) Other schools have chosen to have a separate student-services director and faculty-support department, the current arrangement at Andrews University (Berrien Springs, Michigan, U.S.A).

Another approach is to embed tutoring in the library services for online students, as Southern Adventist University (Collegedale, Tennessee, U.S.A.) currently does. At the K-12 level, one way to organize support is by the grade level of students served, as Griggs International Academy at Andrews University has done. Whatever the approach, it should focus on the overall delivery of instruction, not just the online courses.

Designing Online Programs

Online programs require planning and support. Areas to consider include need, intended audience, technology tools, outcomes, course sequencing, finances, attendance and participation requirements, and the school-to-community experience. Hiring qualified teachers and monitoring and evaluating their performance is also a critical part of the planning process. (See La Ronda Forsey's article on page 11 in this issue for more on this topic.)

• **Need.** First, consider the need for the program. Online students at the university level tend to be adult learners who don't want to uproot their families to travel to the school. Online students at the K-12 level may have unique needs or values that can best be met by the flexibility of online learning. In addition, students at all levels may use online courses to deal with gaps and scheduling challenges in their on-campus learning plan.

Spend some time researching the

Online Education Terms Used in This Issue*

Asynchronous learning
Learning that does not take place in real time; participants connect at a time convenient to them.

Blended learning
Traditional classroom activities and instruction are combined with online activities and instruction for a percentage of the course (typically 30 percent).

Content Management System (CMS)
A computer-based platform that allows users to create and modify content (e.g., WordPress).

Distance learning
Instruction delivered to the student through lectures or assignments sent via the Internet.

E-journaling
Using an electronic medium to write, store, or share journal entries.

Face-to-face learning
Instruction that takes place in a traditional classroom with students and teachers occupying the same space at the same time.

Learning Management System (LMS)
Computer-based systems that are used to organize and manage the delivery of online courses and programs (e.g., Blackboard, WebCT, Desire2Learn, or Moodle).

Virtual classroom
An online classroom where students engage in activities similar to those in a face-to-face classroom using presentations, videos, discussion groups, etc., to communicate and interact with one another.

Synchronous learning
Learning that takes place in real time with all participants connecting simultaneously.

*The Online Definitions Project (October 2011): https://www.inacol.org/resource/the-online-learning-definitions-project/.

potential audience for an online program and explore how best to address their needs. What are the needs? What types of students are likely to enroll in the degree program? How does the proposed program—and tuition—compare to what its competitors offer? Can the intended audience afford the planned tuition costs? Is there a market that needs this program, or is the market already saturated? For example, because many online MBAs are available, this has created a market saturation in the United States. For this reason, it would not be wise to start a new online MBA. Research thoughtfully the need and market for the envisioned program. Online resources or university researchers can provide assistance as you consider how to conduct a needs assessment and survey the market for your program.[9]

• **Intended Audience**. Understanding the intended audience will help inform essential characteristics of the program design and delivery options. Do potential students all live in the same time zone or nearby time zones? What level of flexibility will students want from their online program? Will required synchronous (live) sessions be a benefit or a barrier to the intended audience? Do the members of the potential audience already attend a brick-and-mortar school and desire online offerings only to supplement their education? Or are they homeschooled children; traveling, working adults; or another population that is best reached with an online delivery?

What computer and motivational skills will students need? Will synchronous delivery be the best option for them?[10] Will local centers be used to support the distance learning, with students coming together for project-based learning, proctored testing, and other types of face-to-face educational experiences?[11] As you identify an online program's po-

tential audience and learn as much as you can about them, you will be able to design an attractive package that meets their learning needs.

• **Technology Tools.** Online education relies heavily on technology tools, both computer hardware and software. From server capabilities to database and networking systems, resources need to be readily available *in advance* to sustain an online program. Mandatory technology includes a learning-management system, a method for storing and streaming video, and a tool for video-conferencing live, synchronous class meetings.

In addition, a school may desire to provide collaborative work tools such as Google Apps, and an e-mail address for each student. Tools should be selected carefully. Use already-existing technology within the institution or school as much as possible. Consider the audience, their daily schedules, time zones, and Internet access.[12] Establish a technology committee that includes educators and technology experts, and assign them to create a technology plan and to provide oversight for the selection, implementation, support, and maintenance of the technology tools.[13]

• **Defining and Assessing Outcomes**. *Student learning outcomes* are the knowledge, skills, or behaviors that students should be able to demonstrate upon completion of the program. Program outcomes should be established and carefully defined as part of the curriculum planning and design process. What should students be able to do when they complete the program?[14] How will these outcomes be measured? What skills are desired by the employers of students who graduate from this program? What types of learning experiences and practicums are necessary to help students progress to the next grade level or to degree completion? What kinds of academic weaknesses will require remediation in adult students enrolling in online courses after

many years outside the classroom? (Common areas that need addressing include academic writing and computer skills.[15])

• **Course Sequencing**. Curriculum design staff at the school, or at a nearby university, may be able to provide assistance or training in designing the curriculum and sequence of the courses. Course sequencing should be considered after courses are designed and learning experiences planned to meet the intended outcomes.

Questions to think about at this stage include the following: What plans are in place to help students facing a major life event or setback? How will this type of problem affect their ability to follow the established sequence of courses? Will such students be able to join another cohort? How much time will they be allowed after the event to complete this transition, and who will assist them? Are there established, stated policies to guide this transition?

Benchmark your program with similar programs at other schools. This type of research can provide guidance as you create the policies and procedures for your program.

• **Finances**. Online programs are often erroneously seen as cash-generating enterprises. Experts disagree on whether online programs cost just as much as face-to-face programs or whether they should typically cost less. See https://www.onlineprogramhowto.org/budget/ for a more detailed analysis. Adventist schools should focus on the mission of Christian education, aiming to provide access to church-sponsored schooling to a greater number of students. Plans for online education should include careful thought about the audience and mission. (See "Intended Audience" earlier in this article.) The careful thought and planning that goes into the program should include an investigation of

the potential source(s) of funding, operational costs, and projected income. What is the funding source for this start-up investment? How many students will be needed to ensure that the program is financially viable enough to continue into the future? How many staff members? Will the program utilize adjunct faculty only, or also use full-time teachers already employed by the institution? Will full-time faculty have their teaching loads adjusted to accommodate the demands of preparing for and teaching in an online program? Who will determine pay scales? The resources in the sidebar provide additional information on planning how to finance the online program.

• **In-person Attendance**. Will students be required to come to the school for any part of the school year (K-12) or degree program? For example, the school might have an orientation at the beginning or a capstone experience at the end. Some courses might include a face-to-face attendance requirement, others might be completely asynchronous.

Above all, consider the intended audience and its needs, as well as the instructional needs. Are there some presentations that absolutely must be delivered in person? Will the intended audience be able to travel to school, given their schedules, other responsibilities, and finances? Where will they stay during the times when they are required to be on campus? K-12 students (minors) will need to be accompanied by parents and chaperones, so accommodations for these groups should be considered as well. Consider all perspectives during this stage of the planning process.

• **School Community Experience**. Learning takes place in community, and the online education experience, like traditional education, requires community. Christian schools are communities of faith comprised of worship experiences, guest speakers, forums, weekend programs, visits to faculty homes, and more.[16] These experiences contribute to the distinct character of the school and enhance students' feelings of belonging and connection. What similar experiences will the program offer within and outside courses? Will the courses be designed and structured to include student support or study groups?

Does the institution offer town-hall meetings, seminars, symposia, or other events for students who are currently enrolled in the school or degree program? If so, how can similar experiences be provided online?

How will online students gain ac-

cess to institutional information, such as the bulletin, weekly news, social media, YouTube content, staff and student directories, streaming of church services, podcasts, the college radio station, etc.? Who will be assigned to invite online students to attend streamed events? What provisions will be made for students' social and spiritual networking with one another? Be intentional about setting up a learning community for online and face-to-face students to interact.[17]

Online Education Policies

Every school has policies that guide practice. Review current policies, adapting as needed, and create additional policies for online education. Areas to consider include philosophical, academic, governance, human resources, legal, technical, and fiscal policies.[18] Define methods for ensuring compliance with the regulations and rules for operating online in each of the countries where students are being served. Ensure that the school has permission to operate in the states and countries where online education is being offered. Decide how to handle academic control and oversight, particularly at the higher education level. Will online delivery be embedded with face-to-face instruction? A completely separate entity? Or somewhere in between? Ensure that structures for assessment and program review are in place for online as well as face-to-face programs. Create a committee to oversee online initiatives with faculty, library, student services, and support staff participation and representation (see, for example: http://online.aiias.edu/about/dol-staff).

Online advisors are typically students' main contact with the institution. Advisors offer support throughout the whole learning experience, and often provide a bridge between distance students and processes created for on-campus students that may be challenging for the online student.

Providing Student Services

Use a systems approach to create and set up student support services: advising, peer network, listing of courses, bookstore, library, technology, and alumni services.[19] A systems approach considers all the components and how they interrelate with one another.[20] Sometimes these services and components are referred to as the "wraparound" to the online courses. They impact the quality of the program and student experience and should be planned carefully.

• **Admissions**. Will new students be accepted once a year, each semester, or more often? The big for-profit institutions have set a high competitive standard with fast admissions processes (within two weeks or less) and many starting points throughout the year so students can start soon after they select the degree they wish to pursue. Who will assist online students with navigating the registration process? How will the admissions office ensure a fast response time for prospective students?

• **Orientation**. How will the school provide online students with an orientation to the university, the department, the degree, and the online environment? Will the orientation take place face-to-face, online, in a synchronous live session, or via a mini-course embedded in the learning-management system (LMS)? While the age and capability of the students will determine how this is done, the following should be part of every student's orientation experience: friendly welcome messages that set the tone for the school online experience; prayer with and for the students as they start their academic journey; introduction of all the people with whom the students will interact, including library support, the program director, faculty for at least the first course, LMS support, etc.; introductions by students; an overview of the program, including outcomes, specific learning experiences, unique experiences, etc.; and a video demo of an online course in the program so students know what to expect and how to interact with their teachers.

• **Advising**. Online advisors are typically students' main contact with the institution. Advisors offer support throughout the whole learning experience, and often provide a bridge between distance students and processes created for on-campus students that may be challenging for the online student.[21] Plan to address the following areas: Who will provide advising for online students? Are these individuals prepared to do videoconferencing and respond quickly to students' questions? Are they trained in the unique needs and perspectives of online students, whether K-12 students or young adults and adults at the college and university level? Who will send regular updates with encouragement and reminders about the next steps in the students' academic journey?

• **Library**. Are the internal processes set up so that online students can access the school's library services? How will online students be trained to access and use library resources? Will one or more library staff members be trained and provided with tools to communicate effectively with online students?

• **Academic Support (Disability Accommodations, Counseling Services, and Student Success).** How will online students obtain the services to which other students at your school are entitled? What disability accommodations will be available? Is the counseling and testing office ready to support online students? What tutoring services are available or should be made available to online students? Will students be able to access on-campus student success centers such as the writing center, math center, or study skills lab? Are these offices set up to assist online students? Who will refer students for these services?

• **Technology Support**. Some questions to consider include the following: What range of services will the school provide? Which office will provide tech support for online students? For example, will the school support just the LMS and videoconferencing tools? What if students have issues with their personal computers? Will online students be entitled to discounts on academic software and printed materials? What hours will the help desk be open for students and teachers?

• **Proctoring; Deterring Academic Dishonesty**. How will the identity of online students be verified? How will the integrity of the assessment processes be maintained? One of the concerns regarding the quality of online education is this question: How does the institution know that the person doing the work is the student receiving the credit? This important question should be addressed to ensure a quality assessment experience. Using a proctor allows the school to compare the ID of the student to the person who completes an important assessment necessary to pass the course. Some schools proctor exams through a videoconference, while others require students to meet with an approved proctor, and some even require on-campus proctoring.[22]

Online programs also need to identify and implement effective ways of deterring academic dishonesty in daily assignments and research/term papers. Strategies can include clearly stating what constitutes academic dishonesty (what it looks like) and including this in the handbook for online students; establishing policies for reporting academic dishonesty, as well as policies for disciplinary actions; arming teachers with strategies to help deter students from submitting the work of someone else as their own; and investing in software tools that can help detect plagiarism.[23]

• **Automated E-mails and Learning Analytics**. Will automatic e-mails be set up for students to ensure that they receive reminders and essential information at key points in the academic journey? What about creating other alerts and notifications triggered by data analytics in the LMS or student-information system to alert staff to guide and redirect students to the next steps to success?

• **Complaints**. How will student complaints be received and processed? Who will ensure that students' concerns are addressed in a timely manner?

• **Marketing.** Identify the specific market target. It should be a sufficiently large market to sustain the program and enable it to grow. Research and review how that audience prefers to receive advertising—via e-mail, Facebook, text messaging, or printed flyers? What online communities or listservs might help you reach the audience? Who is available in the institution to assist in marketing the online degree or program?

Implementing a high-quality administrative support system for online learning, elementary through higher education, takes thoughtful planning and careful, strategic work. Administrators and education stakeholders must do the groundwork to ensure the delivery of a quality Adventist online education. The best-practices principles discussed within this article will help ensure that programs align with the school's mission, that programs have the necessary online learning-support systems in place for faculty and students, and that the programs are designed to meet specific market needs.

With careful planning, an effective system can be created. ✐

This article has been peer reviewed.

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