



An Interview With Pam Cress and Susan Smith

Shirley Freed: Awhile ago, you completed a collaborative study on distance education in the North American Division [NAD]. What was the purpose of this study?

Pam Cress: Our dissertation titles, while similar, indicate our separate focuses—I was interested in the perceptions of higher education administrators about online education, and Susan was interested in faculty perceptions. The research question guiding both studies was: *To what extent do Adventist colleges and universities in NAD demonstrate quality in their online educational programming?*

The motivation to do this study for me came from my own learning in non-traditional environments, i.e., distance learning and my interest in collaboration. Having taken several successful online classes myself, I was interested in finding out whether Internet-based education was viable and if it might be the wave of the future. Having a partner to help conduct this research allowed for a broader perspective and description of online education in Adventist higher education that would not have been available had I done this on my own.

Shirley: What kind of a study was this? What kinds of data did you gather?

Susan Smith: Our study used a sequential mixed-methods model.¹ We first collected the quantitative data, then obtained qualitative data through interviews with educators identified in the survey part of the study.

The quantitative portion of our study used the 24 summative evaluation benchmarks developed in the Institute of Higher Education Policy (IHEP) study *Quality on the Line: Benchmarks for Success in Internet-Based Distance Education*² to assess the quality of online education in nine Adventist colleges and universities in North America. These benchmarks came out of best practices and recommendations over the years from institutions actively involved in distance learning, and were developed to evaluate the quality of online education in higher education.

We sent online surveys to 149 NAD higher education faculty (all persons teaching at least one course online in the 2002-2003 academic year) and administrators (presidents, vice-presidents—academic, financial, enrollment—and directors of distance education, information technology, and academic computing). Fifty-two teachers and 35 administrators responded. From the quantitative data, “experts” in online education were identified from each campus, whom we contacted and interviewed for the qualitative portion of the study.



Shirley Freed (left) conducts this live online interview with Pamela Cress (center) and Susan Smith.

Shirley: Why did you choose these benchmarks, and how did you use them in your study?

Pam: What we liked about IHEP’s 24 benchmarks was that they (1) were specifically about online learning, and (2) could be used by themselves to form the basis for the quantitative tool we needed to answer our research questions. The benchmarks are clustered into seven areas that address institutions’ efforts to support Internet-based education. Four areas are administratively focused (institutionally controlled), and three areas are under faculty control, making this assessment an excellent tool for both focuses of the joint study. Institutionally controlled benchmark clusters included institutional support, faculty support, student support, and evaluation and assessment. Faculty-controlled benchmarks included course development, teaching/learning, and course structure.

Shirley: What were the results of your study? What did you discover?

Susan: First, it is important to note that our study indicated that most schools in the study were operating online classes and programs under what A. W. Bates³ would call “lone ranger” models of online learning. This model is one where individual faculty develop and teach distance-education courses without the support of specialists. In other words, individual teachers on Adventist campuses are the ones initiating and teaching Internet-based courses (and sometimes whole distance-education programs) without focused support from the institution. In some cases, faculty are doing this in addition to regular full-time face-to-face teaching loads.



Pam: For my part of the study, the quantitative results indicate that overall administrator and teacher perceptions of Internet-based education on their campuses met the benchmarks for quality in all areas except for institutional support, and evaluation and assessment benchmarks. After integrating the quantitative and qualitative findings, the implications for administrators became more clear—indicating that there is lack of attention to strategic planning, design, and delivery of online distance education, online program evaluation and assessment, and ongoing support of distance-education faculty. Data showed that Adventist colleges and universities are not being intentional in the planning and delivery of online education.

Curiously, administrator perceptions, on the whole, were favorable to Internet-based education, with the majority indicating plans to increase the offerings within their institutions. The NAD administrators do seem to understand that online education will most likely not go away.

However, as I have already stated, both data sets indicate that higher education administrators are not actively responding to several main institutional components within the larger system of distance education. These components, which were measured in the quantitative portion of the study under the institutional support benchmarks, included strategic planning for technology infrastructure, support of teaching with technology, policy and management structures for online education, and monitoring and evaluation of online programs. Qualitative data also reinforced the need for attention to strategic planning and faculty support.

There are some signs that a few upper-level administrators have initiated system-wide technology and distance-education strategic planning on their campuses. However, the majority of Adventist higher education leaders appear to still view this type of planning with benevolent indifference. This finding should cause some unease because instructional technology and Internet-based education already exist in some form, on most, if not all, Adventist campuses.

Susan: The faculty-controlled benchmarks addressed three subsets: teaching and learning, course structure, and course development. There was strong consensus that inter-

activity and feedback are important in the delivery of online classes. Faculty also spoke about how their pedagogy had changed as they moved their classes online—becoming more student-centered and constructivist in nature. Regarding course objectives and library access, respondents agreed that these features are in place in their institution. The first course development benchmark states: “Guidelines regarding minimum standards are used for course development, design, and delivery. . .” Faculty agreed that standards are important, but there was ambiguity about which standards should be used and how they should be applied. Also, there was some wonderment about why standards are so important with online classes, but are not applied or used in traditional face-to-face classes.

The issue of faculty workload may be the single most important issue to attend to in order to expand professional



development in the use of educational technology and online teaching scholarship. The qualitative findings revealed significant discussion on the issues of remuneration and faculty workload; however, the concern seemed focused on the desire for more time rather than money.

Shirley: What surprised you?

Pam: One of the biggest surprises in this study was the identification of a unique hybrid group of administrators who, in addition to their administrative role, also had online teaching experience. These were, in most cases, mid-level people—deans, chairs, and staff department directors. It was fascinating to compare them with other administrators and faculty. Additionally, we found that six of the nine identified distance-education experts were administrators/teachers. The stories of the mid-level administrators revealed tales of pioneering online education in their institutions despite lack of support and commitment from upper-level administration.

Another unexpected finding: Thirty-one percent of the upper-level administrators surveyed did not identify with the role of visioning for distance education, 41 percent did not identify with the role of strategic planning, while 37 percent did identify with the role of policymaking. This nar-

row vision of administrators' roles was intriguing to me, as these seem to be core roles for leaders. It could be that this narrow thinking may be attributed to leadership's preference for focusing on managing details or facts rather than the big picture, or it simply could be the result of administrator delegation of distance-education planning to a specific person or department.

It is interesting to note here that we found that a higher percentage of the administrator/teacher group discussed earlier identified with the roles of visioning, strategic planning, and policy-making for distance education in contrast to upper-level administrators—in all three categories. This finding may have to do with the reality that visionary leaders do not exist only at the top of institutions, but can be found within the core as well.

Susan: Finally, although this study was not gender focused, an unexpected finding was the differences in perceptions about the IHEP benchmarks by men and women. All of the benchmark mean scores were higher for women than men, indicating more favorable responses from women. Statistical significance was found on the basis of gender for the benchmarks of course development, teaching/learning, course structure, student support, and evaluation and assessment. The reasons for this finding are unclear and may be complex. For instance, literature supports the idea that the adoption of technology is considered a masculine trait,⁴ and some⁵ have speculated that the need to compensate for being female in a male-dominated field may be why some women are more open to technology and online teaching. In addition, since online education is new to Adventist institutions, it may be, as Berge⁶ suggests, that high affirmation and involvement of women in the early development of technologies is normal. Whatever the reasons, this finding certainly warrants more research.

Shirley: What are some implications of your study for Adventist educators in our colleges and universities?

Pam: Adventist colleges and universities should not ignore distance education and technology infrastructure. Focusing attention on distance-education strategic planning, design and delivery of online distance education, online program evaluation, and assessment will strengthen Adventist institutions as they work with students. Administrators can support faculty by intentional planning that addresses faculty loads and/or compensation for online distance teaching, provide training for faculty in understanding online pedagogical and assessment methods, and assist them in using the appropriate technology for the classes they teach.

Shirley: Is distance education important for the North American Division? Why or why not? What do we need to do next to further distance education in NAD?

Susan: It is our belief that distance education is important for Adventist higher education in North America. Internet-based distance education has already become an integral part of course delivery for our institutions. This type of education is not going to go away, as students who are technologically savvy will begin to demand more of these types of

educational experiences. Systematic adoption of institutional and instructional policies and practices for distance education will assist in promoting excellence.

In light of the challenges described above, collaborative ventures or partnerships may well be one of the new paradigms to provide cost-effective technology and educational services to students accessing Adventist universities and colleges. We must collaborate to help one another (1) understand the implications of new technologies on the classroom, (2) manage and set up new technologies, and (3) afford the new technologies. It is my opinion that collaborations on technology costs and management would be important even without distance-education programs.

Some collaborations have already begun within the system. Additional collaborative ventures may help to reduce costs and provide needed support. It might be useful to further explore successful collaborative models between students, classes, and/or institutions to obtain more ideas on how to share the burdens and joys of distance education. ✉



Pamela Cress

Pamela Cress is the recently appointed Dean of the Wilma Hepker School of Social Work at Walla Walla College [WWC]. Before being appointed Dean, Cress served on the social work faculty at WWC for 10 years as Professor, Field Coordinator, and Assistant Dean. In 2005, she completed her doctorate in leadership from Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan. Her dissertation, "Administrator Perceptions of Internet-Based Distance Education in Adventist Colleges and Universities," was done as a collaborative project with her colleague, Susan Smith. **Susan B. Smith, Ph.D., LICSW,** is Professor of Social Work and Sociology and the Director of Distance Learning at Walla Walla College in College Place, Washington. Her dissertation was "Teacher Perceptions of Internet-Based Distance Education in Adventist Colleges and Universities: A Mixed-Methods Study." **Shirley Freed** is an AVLN board member and Chair of the Department of Leadership and Educational Administration in the School of Education at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan. Dr. Freed teaches all of her classes on-line.



Susan B. Smith



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