**Assignment 3**
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Regional University has been successfully delivering an online master's program for teachers and certificate program that is catered to educational leaders for the past 10 years. Both programs include a one-week summer residency session with the remainder taught online. The face-to-face (F2F) session is a requirement for the certificate program, however due to increases in enrollment and geographic diversity of the student population, it is optional for the master's program. The F2F session provides a beneficial revenue source for the university and is viewed positively by students, who appreciate it and have voiced enthusiasm for it. The recently hired director of online graduate programs believes that the inclusion of a F2F session is inappropriate for a distance education (DE) program and wants to eliminate it from both the master's and certificate programs. Not everyone agrees with this strategy, and the dean has asked for an assessment of this matter. In accordance with the dean's request, and after careful analysis, this special taskforce is providing its recommendations and reasons for it.

Anderson (2004) explains that the ability and potential of online learning to enhance access to education, particularly higher education, is largely determined by the learner's circumstances. Three limitations that define the essential needs for distance education are a very large population wanting education but having to compete for access to a limited number of spots in F2F settings, learners that are located across a country or even countries, and learners wanting to use technologically based educational platforms to structure their learning and have greater flexibility and access. Steiner & Hyman (2010) suggest that students should be allowed to make an informed choice about their preferred course of delivery method, be it online or F2F. In each setting, it has been shown that students overall believe that their choice of education delivery has been satisfactory and meets their expectations (2010). Barcelona (2009) expresses that numerous studies have consistently shown that online learning is at least the equal of F2F

instruction and in many cases is its superior. However, Barcelona (2009) also reported that "extant research has shown that attrition rates among online learners often exceed those of their peers in F2F settings" (p. 2). Steiner & Hyman (2010) express that F2F instruction is "being credited for its interactive, experiential, and social nature of teaching" (p. 3) that may not be obtained through online instruction. These factors may give cause to good reason why students enrolled in online instruction should be offered the opportunity for a F2F residency.

When asked, students reported that they viewed both online and F2F instruction as being well organized, thorough, and challenging (Steiner & Hyman, 2010). Although some instructors and administrators viewed the high ratings from students as insufficient reasons to offer the option, Steiner & Hyman (2010) stated that the desire for choice of options are attributable to the range of students that are attracted to both online and face-to-face learning. They also noted that offering students different instructional delivery systems is an effective way to serve the student population with diverse education goals, levels of self-discipline and social skills, learning styles, and time constraints (2010).

Conrad (2005) states that community is important to the success of online learners, with community defined as a "general sense of connection, belonging, and comfort that develops over time among members of a group who share purpose or commitment to a common goal" (p. 2). This sense of community can develop among online learners through "regular participation, shared problem solving, personal contact, providing feedback, clear expression, frequent visits to the learning portal website, investing time, being open and cheerful, sharing learner background, freely exchanging thoughts and ideas, developing trust, supporting others, exhibiting consideration and honesty, and encouraging the participation of others through supportive dialogue" (2005, p.8).

However, Conrad (2005) has also learned through her case study of a master's program that includes both online and F2F residency, the immense power of the F2F portion to enhance learning. She states "distance learners who have the opportunity to meet each other face to face, even once, report an enormous surge in connectedness and satisfaction with the program design" (2005, p. 9). Furthermore, learners earning their master's degree in the dual-mode university said that, "dual complementary relationships between face-to-face and online communications each facilitated greater ease in the other medium" (2005, p. 9). A synergistic and multiplicative effect was observed when F2F sessions offered once a year for one to a few weeks in duration are combined with online learning throughout the year (2005). It is likely this is one of the reasons students in our current university have reacted so positively to the F2F portion, and have attended it even when it has been optional and been an extra cost for them.        One student in Conrad's (2005) case study says:

> I think once we had the opportunity to interact face-to-face in the first spring institute, our online course following was much more engaging and early on there was a warm supportive sense of community that intensified at the second spring institute—the 'in person' flattering the online experience. (p.9)

Conrad (2005) even describes instances of reunions, when some that were in the same F2F session, decided to enroll in an elective together, and stayed in another learner's home. An underground network developed among this group that allowed them to provide support for each other when they were not able to obtain the necessary information from their teacher. These close learning relationships that have transferred to real-life appear to indicate life-long or at least long-term connections are being made as a result of F2F sessions. Such connections can be very powerful professionally for education leaders who are enrolled in the certificate of

advanced graduate study, due to sharing of visions, but also for teachers in the master's degree program.

Beaudoin (2003) presents a dimension of the online learner that is also essential when considering the question of the F2F portion: the 'invisible' online student. The program that Conrad (2005) had studied was cohort based, meaning all students in the program started at the same time and were lockstep throughout the duration of the master's program. This is often not the case with DE. In fact, one of the desirable aspects of DE is the flexibility in timing and location by which learners pursue their education or the level of interaction a learner may choose to have with others learners, with some interacting less. Beaudoin (2003) aims to enter the mind of this type of online learner, to understand how they study and how active participation in community relates to their learning. Some of what he learns is in some ways the antithesis of Conrad's (2005) assessments regarding the importance of community, in particular how it is constructed, including its dependence of F2F learning. However, it can be said that to be a lurking online learner does not necessarily mean one does not feel to be a member of a learning community; therefore, Conrad's ideas should not be discounted, but rather attenuated (Beaudoin, 2003; Conrad, 2005).

Beaudoin (2003) considers "it is curious that, although an historical tenet of DE is the notion of learners autonomously constructing their own knowledge, instructors facilitating the learning process for distant students often become alarmed when dialog with them wanes" (p. 2). 75% of online learners said that they preferred to read what others had written, and half said others had already made a comment that they had thought about but did not write in time (2003). All but one said that they often considered and thought through perspectives obtained from a DE course even when not posting online. 80% said they learned

just as well from reading and thinking about the comments of other learners, compared to the process of preparing and posting their own thoughts (2003). Half self-identified as autonomous learners less interested in group learning "regardless of the medium" (2003, p. 5).

This last characteristic in particular may mean that some learners would simply not be interested in a F2F setting where group dynamics are central, and would instead prefer the more unobtrusive online setting to learn. That said, Beaudoin (2003) also postulates that the online setting is more formal, more public, and more permanent than the more spontaneous F2F setting and that those characteristics of the asynchronous online learning environment may contribute to lurking. Clearly, personal preferences and characteristics are at play. Lastly, Beaudoin (2003) discovers that although learners who usually actively participate tend to do well in graded assignments, lurkers do not compromise their grades and learning. This may indicate that "low visibility students are dedicating more time to reflection and processing of course material that translates to stronger assignments" (2003, p. 7) and that "the more autonomous and self-directed learner is more reflective and so requires less stimulation and interaction with other learners" (2003, p. 6).

That said, a field of study like teaching or educational leadership may naturally require a greater amount of human interaction for affective learning for example, than a field like computer science might. Students at our university have consistently expressed interest in and satisfaction from participating in the F2F portion, and indeed it has been proven that F2F sessions can have immense rewards for learners. The F2F session can also be a venue for formative assessment of cutting edge materials, or to gauge the pulse of the student body as it were. At the same time, DE must be flexible or it ceases to be as inclusive as it could be and may lose its equality. There may be students who simply do not want to attend the F2F session even if

they could take time from their family and work, and spend money to travel. For all of these reasons, we propose that the F2F session be maintained and encouraged for both programs, but not required.

Another factor considered in the proposal of keeping the F2F summer residency session is to prevent online students feeling alienated by the lack of connectivity with fellow classmates. Barcelona (2009) suggests that while faculty may prefer structured interactions because they encourage time on task, online students see the value in the relationships formed with their classmates and teachers as a direct result of a collaborative learning environment. The summer F2F component could help online students who may crave the connectivity with their fellow classmates, due to the physical isolation from one another (2009).

We conclude that the existing research in this area, the positive feedback from students to the previous F2F sessions, students' dismay at the potential loss of these sessions, and support of the faculty and the additional revenue stream to the university all point to need for a rational compromise. We recommend that both the master's and certificate residency programs be optional for a period of two years. During this time, additional data may be collected, including participation rates, student and faculty satisfaction, and precise revenue generation. This concrete data may help to improve the program, or change its status at the university.

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