

A DISTANT PERSPECTIVE ON DISTANCE COORDINATION

Gary Bess, Ph.D., California State University, Chico

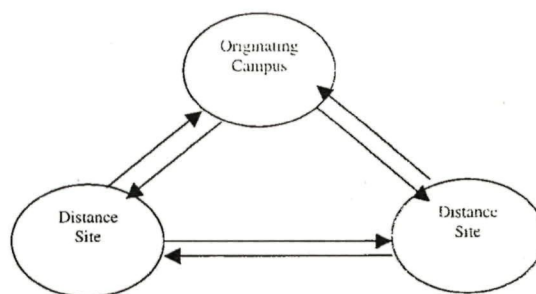
This narrative is a personal account detailing the challenges of implementing a rural Distance Education program sponsored by an urban university. The author discusses how he brought opposing elements together to create a successful educational program.

For six years, between 1995 and 2001, I served as the site coordinator on a rural northern California campus for a pilot distance education Masters in Social Work program offered by California State University, Long Beach (CSULB). We were one of two receiving sites during the first three-year round, and one of two paired sites (one of four remote campuses) during the second offering. The local university had offered an accredited BSW program since 1957, and the distance program was viewed as an opportunity to test the waters of MSW interest and resources

A network of fiber optic cables links the California State University (CSU) system, thus making it possible for real-time audio-video transmissions. A professor in a classroom at Long Beach in southern California, for example, was able to present to classes of students at two remote sites, seeing and hearing students in the distant classroom, and they the professor.

My students could also see their counterparts in the other remote classroom and be seen by them as well. By viewing one of four classroom wall-mounted monitors and by speaking into desk-mounted microphones, students could address their professor and respond to comments by students at the other remote site. Confused? See Diagram A for clarification

Diagram A



Though the computer-age term *multi-tasking* was not part of my vocabulary during this period, on reflection it resonates strongly as an apt descriptor, given that site coordinators were assigned — perhaps by default — multiple roles. In many ways we were the local embodiment of the student affairs coordinator, field liaison, teaching aid, community-relations coordinator, and admissions director. I also taught several of the macro-focused courses. Though administrative direction was forthcoming from the Long Beach campus, our remoteness — 500 miles to the north of Long Beach — required me to sometimes ad-lib my role.

Having obtained a distant and detached perspective, and no longer engaged as an employee of CSULB, I can take a fresh look at this experience with an eye toward preparing others for this or comparable roles.

Big versus Small

Working in a small rural town as a social work professional is unlike working in the big city. I know because I've lived and worked in both. In the city, you have counterparts – others that do what you do or at least perform similar kinds of work. You are not one of a kind. You can disappear when not on duty and not worry about being approached by a prospective applicant or his or her friend, colleague, or parent. Your social work coordinator's persona is invisible in the city; there is no need to whisper across tables in restaurants about your crazy day for fear of being overheard by someone with an interest in what you do. Though confidentiality is always a value to uphold, the likelihood of encountering someone who knows me is substantially diminished in the city.

Conversely, in a small town, there is often just one of everything: one Taco Bell, one Radio Shack, and one distance education coordinator. I'm a local personality of sorts, albeit in a small pond. Those interested in obtaining a master's degree in social work call me. Their choices are few – they know it before they place the call. In addition to the part-time and weekend distance program that I represent, they can commute to an MSW degree-granting program, 85 miles to the south, though the commute can be longer if they live farther north or along a country road. If accepted to that program, they likely will need to attend full-time – a difficult commitment for returning students. Or, they can pursue a master's degree in a different area, aware that it possibly may not be as personally or professionally fulfilling.

In my small community, I'm a local resource with extra-community ties. With my connections to Long Beach, I'm not encumbered with the usual challenge to my credibility that local experts face – I'm credible at home as well as away.

The calls from prospective students often concern questions about the program: "How

long is the program?" "When are courses offered?" or, "What is the field requirement?" These I can quickly answer.

There are other questions, however, which are a bit thornier: "How difficult is the program?" "Can I work and go to school?" "How much reading is there?" These questions I dread. First, they are difficult to answer as they reflect on individual capacity. I offer my perception, saying that the odds are against success if students work. I profile former students that tried. The caller always assumes that he or she will escape the odds. I never truly found an appropriate response, maybe because I never felt comfortable saying what I actually believe.

First, I don't respect this all-to-common line of questioning. In fact, I resent it. I resent the value implicit in the question: "What is the minimal amount that I'll need to do to earn my diploma?" While the public relations role that I play says that I should respond with awareness that my comments could appear in tomorrow's newspaper – another dimension of small town life – the professional in me says that I don't want to invite into our fold those that won't give their *all*.

Yet, perhaps their naiveté is a reflection of their absence of professional socialization, and perhaps their attitudes will change. Maybe I also see in them what I recall in myself. Though I didn't dare ask how much work was involved, I silently questioned whether I had what it takes to be a social worker (e.g., smarts, resources, or innate qualities). I also know that in a different context, the espoused value – expediency – can be important to social work. Reducing red tape or improving access to services is central to social work. Can this minimalist approach be redirected to benefit clients in their charge?

I never resolved this question.

Multiple Roles

Another factor is the autonomy of my coordinator position, necessitated by the

distance between the main campus and my remote site, the convergent roles that I played, and the unpredictable circumstances that required on-the-spot improvisation. I personally liked being autonomous. I liked doing my job without having to regularly check in. I made myself available to students before and after class every Saturday and was able to reflect on policies that affect them without feeling duty bound to support or uphold them without commentary. It is easier to take this approach when you are not on the campus.

My irreverent attitude toward policies and procedures, something that I didn't readily disclose, was often challenged by the role that I played. This attitude probably has less to do with social work and more to do with who I am. Being out of earshot of the main campus made it easier for me to speak my mind, and to reframe and interpret policies.

Being a one-person shop has other advantages too. You know what is going on – or, at least, no one knows more than you. Questions are brought to you from students, faculty, and administration, as you are the fulcrum of the hourglass, sifting and filtering grains of information. Students ask: "What is the thesis approval process?" You find out. Professors ask: "How's the course going?" You provide feedback. The field department needs student field evaluations, and you call them in.

If you are concerned that your work should be in lockstep with school policies and procedures, you likely are not suited for the role of site coordinator. There are too many tasks to master, with each having separate sets of requirements to learn, and if you wish to fully rely on a canned approach, distance programs won't support this.

Student Relations and Faculty Relations

There is also an interpersonal dynamic to the distance education work. You need to like

people and to be able to work well with them. Since this is a three-year program, relationships need to be sustained over that period of time. You see the same 20 students in each class for three years. You place them in their field assignments and you work with them on their thesis. You see them grow and you see them resist growth. You learn about their families, the sacrifices they make to obtain their education, and the stressors that can take their toll.

You also become acquainted with the faculty, their styles of teaching, and their expectations of students as well as of you. An interesting ethic of university education, which presents a distance education challenge, is that the classroom is sacrosanct. The instructor is in charge. There is no interference by university representatives, other faculty, outside administrators, or even a distance coordinator.

In the distance program model, however, faculty rely upon the distance coordinator for distribution of materials, test giving, amplification of concepts, and coordination of in-class activities. The distance coordinator also is a barometer of the classroom – a resource that faculty can choose to use or not. Teaching face to face in a conventional classroom allows instructors to gauge the class' mood, to take its temperature of comprehension, and to informally meet with students before or after class to answer specific questions or to discuss class performance.

Though distance students can call and email their instructors, this isn't quite the same thing. And during this time frame, not all students were on email, as we assume today; thus communication vis-à-vis email wasn't the norm. Similarly, calling an instructor at the university, which could work for some, was also an uncomfortable experience for students who hold their professors in awe – or at least are concerned that they not seem foolish or whiny by calling.

It is easier to have an on-the-spot encounter by waiting in line before or after class. So, it was not uncommon for some students to present their questions to the distance coordinator in lieu of their instructor. My challenge in fielding their queries was to help where I could but not to provide information that could be undone or contradicted by the instructor. He or she would determine the final grade based on his or her directions and assignments – not mine.

In some instances, I'd provide advice or direction, suggesting that the student check these ideas with their professor during class or by telephone or email. Having already bounced the idea past me, students approached their professor with greater confidence. At other times, I couldn't render an opinion. I didn't know – especially if it was a micro or human behavior inquiry – or I didn't want to second guess the professor or interfere with the class process. Much of my decision making depended upon my relationship with the instructors, my understanding of their approach and course objectives, and my trust of them (and they of me) relative to my and their roles.

In the best of situations, the distance coordinator served as a bridge. Not quite as profound as Henry Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy, I did, however, keep communication going, hopefully enhancing the students' educational experience by facilitating it.

Community Relations and Agency Relations

The six years of my involvement with the distance education program was an exciting time. Contributing to the excitement were the relationships that developed between the program and local and regional agencies. The professional community was supportive of the program, recognizing the need for additional graduate-level social workers in the region.

The community also represented a source for student field placements – a requisite part of social work education. Not all the agency representatives were social workers, however, and yet I was required to negotiate field placements that would meet social work-training requirements. This included having a graduate social worker as supervisor of record and having students placed within a prescribed time period in order for them to also attend classes on Saturdays and matriculate according to plan.

Agency representatives expressed concern that the courses that students were taking did not prepare them for rural social work. Courses were taught by university faculty whose background and experiences were primarily based in urban settings, and the block field placement arrangement initially proposed did not fit well with their internship structures.

There also was a general sense among agencies that an urban university could not transplant its program without substantial modifications to accommodate small town issues, values, and resources. It was my role to address these concerns with the university, to introduce questions about the fit between current curriculum and practice applicability and whether the block placement model was viable.

I also saw my role as allaying concerns on the part of agencies that the students they accepted would be qualified and that professors were seriously interested in modifying the curriculum to accommodate rural requirements. This seemed to help, though a feeling of uncertainty remained. A distrust of outsiders is, in part, human nature. Yet, the students were not from the outside, which, on reflection, likely helped, as did CSULB's stated commitment to foster the development of a homegrown program, a program that has since reached fruition.

The role of the distance coordinator is multifaceted. To be effective in this domain,

comfort with autonomy is desirable, as well as is multiple and, at times, unclear roles. In this capacity, I found a power and comfort in ambiguity and a challenge that was fulfilling.

Sometimes we assume that bigger is better, or that urban knowledge is superior to rural know-how. As site coordinator, I had one foot in each world – an employee of an urban university charged with managing a rural social work program. As I reflect on my several roles, I would also add one additional function — *quality assurance manager*. While it is true that CSULB's teaching and administrative staff provided the structure, established most policies, and tapped campus faculty to teach in the program, it was incumbent upon me to monitor for local relevance, to filter out unwarranted *urbanism*, and to reframe information in ways that made sense to my rural constituency.

You learn as you go in work as in life. I learned a great deal about similarities and differences between the metropolis and the range, and between social work *wannabees* and social work graduates. I also learned that even in roles of mid-level responsibility, that answers are not always easily given or that the ones that are given, are not always from the heart, let alone the truth.

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