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# THE MPA AND DISTANCE EDUCATION: A STORY AS A TOOL OF ENGAGEMENT

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## **Abstract**

Whether excited by the prospect or not, academics realize that general interest in technology-based distance education is rapidly increasing – a fact which is particularly true for public administration and public policy programs (*see, for example, Ebdon, 1999*). According to the U.S. Department of Education (1997), as of fall 1995, a third of higher education institutions offered distance education and another quarter planned to offer such courses in the next three years (*p. iii*). In academic year 1994-1995, approximately 753,640 students were enrolled in an estimated 25,730 distance education courses offered by higher education institutions. Of those, public four-year institutions offered 45 percent, public two-year institutions offered 39 percent, and private four-year institutions offered 16 percent (*pp. iii-iv*). Degrees and course offerings range from business, to nursing, to social science. Graduate programs in public administration have not escaped the pressure.

Interest among MPA programs in distance education has burgeoned suddenly. This is reflected, for example, in attendance at NASPAA panels on the subject. Just three years ago it was difficult to get more than a dozen participants to such panels. In subsequent years they have seen standing-room-only. Even more noteworthy is the fact that NASPAA has recently adopted new accreditation standards and guidelines addressing distance education (*COPRA, 1999, pp. 24-26*). NASPAA is, at least in principle, ready to embrace distance education as a legitimate component of MPA programs. Things are moving quickly, and we detect an air of urgency among politicians and administrators to jump on the distance-education bandwagon. Indeed, Rahm and Reed (1997) have conducted surveys that

indicate that these officials are responsible for much of the pressure now put on faculty to offer distance courses.

In this context, we offer some insight on the promise and peril of MPA distance education. We must add a caution, however, that we do not present such insight as definitive knowledge about distance learning. Rather, we treat it as “our story” – one through which we may engage readers in the process of exploring distance learning and contributing to its evolution among public administration programs. In this regard, we follow Ralph Hummel (1991) who treats “stories” as a more appropriate and common means of knowledge acquisition in the managerial world (*p. 32*). Merisotis and Phipps (1999) argue that experimental, descriptive, correlational, and case studies are the only appropriate way to assess the differences between distance and classroom-based learning (*p. 13*). We do not claim, therefore, to be detached observers, proffering an explanatory theory and presenting “objective” findings. Rather, we wish to contribute to the process of intersubjectively defining distance learning and its emerging problems in the field. We offer our story “as a tool of engagement” for others who are entering the distance-learning world (*Hummel, 1991, pp. 36-37*). We hope, as a result, to provoke discussion and argument about the nature and implications of this new pedagogical frontier.

This paper draws on our experience as University of Wyoming MPA faculty in developing and conducting a state-wide, distance-based MPA Program over a ten-year period. In doing so, this paper maintains that programmatic success is the result of a confluence of factors not the least of which include establishing the evidence of “need” for distance education, tailoring individual distance education programs to the uniqueness of the community, providing intrinsic and extrinsic rewards to faculty who participate, establishing upper level administrative support, and encouraging faculty and administrative support mechanisms flexible enough to manage the conflicts in perspective, new bureaucratic routines, and evolving technologies. In addition, a primary theme of this paper is that beyond institutional and organizational support, success relies on building and maintaining student/faculty rapport. We believe that MPA faculty, administrators, and students at other universities will find our experience of some interest. Colleges and Universities worldwide are now confronting the question of how they can use distance education to attract new students, cut costs, or even make money (*Rahm & Reed, 1997; Cartwright, 1994*),

and find more productive uses for all the communications technology they are acquiring (*Lewington, 1995*). Toward this goal we begin with a brief history of UW's MPA distance program, and then present our thoughts on the pedagogical, organizational, and administrative aspects of our experience.

### **Developing the Distance MPA Program in Wyoming**

The UW Political Science Department established the on-campus MPA program in 1970. It functioned as a bare-bones operation, averaging only 3-5 graduates each year, until 1983. In that year, the MPA curriculum was revised to conform more closely to NASPAA standards, and expanded in order to offer the entire curriculum at an off-campus location in the state capitol. The MPA class enrollments grew quickly, and the program graduated about a dozen off-campus students each year until 1989.

The University of Wyoming is the only four-year and post-graduate institution in the state. The state's population hovers around 450,000 and is spread out over 100,000 mountainous square miles. Because UW is located in Laramie, near the southeast corner of the state, it is not easily accessible to people in other parts of the state. With UW's acquisition of teleconferencing technology, pressure grew (from legislators and constituents) to offer more coursework off-campus. The MPA faculty viewed this as an opportunity to reach many isolated professionals working in public management.

A series of town meetings held around the state indicated tremendous interest, far more than expected, in the MPA program. The SES Dean then offered to lend two open tenure-track faculty lines to the MPA Program as an incentive to offer the curriculum state-wide. In return, the Political Science Department is obliged to offer a minimum of eight off-campus, on-load courses per year. This turned out to be a very unique arrangement, due mainly to the close relationship with the SES Dean. He was criticized by the central administration for making the deal, and his successors have been less than satisfied with it. Nevertheless, it persists to this day.

The two additional lines brought the MPA core faculty to five in number as of fall 1989. The five faculty lines made the MPA program the

largest component of the Political Science Department. Though lacking an independent budget, the MPA program faculty exercise almost complete autonomy over the MPA program. They occasionally contribute courses to the American politics curriculum, and routinely participate on a variety of departmental governance committees, but the vast majority of time is given to maintaining the MPA program. Given this level of autonomy, revising the curriculum and moving to distance education was made much easier. Enrollments have swelled to over 100 active students, and we currently average approximately two-dozen graduates per year (Table 1).

**Table 1**  
**Mpa Graduates Per Year Since 1991**

Year	Number of Graduates
1991	21
1992	23
1993	18
1994	37
1995	24
1996	26
1997	24
1998	18
1999	18
Total	209

During 1988-89, the MPA faculty expanded the curriculum from 30 to 36 semester hours. With the revised curriculum students are required to complete five “core” courses, two “option-core” courses, and five elective courses. Pre-service students must complete additional credits toward an internship. Finally, all students are required to complete a “Plan B Paper” (in lieu of a Master’s Thesis) and undergo an oral defense before two MPA faculty members and one faculty member from outside the department. In 1993, the MPA faculty created a case-based, three-credit Capstone course to replace the Plan B process which also had the effect of raising the number of required credit hours to 39. This course is team-taught by the MPA faculty, and includes an oral defense of written case analyses before a panel of three faculty members. Off-campus students are required to come to the campus for an intensive weekend and the oral defense. This arrangement

has improved dramatically the degree-completion rate, and has provided a more rewarding evaluation experience for both faculty and students.

### **Administration of the Distance MPA Program**

Most of the administrative difficulties in the distance MPA program at UW arise because authority for the program is shared by two different departments (Political Science and SES). The MPA faculty prepare course schedules, determine all curricular content, advise all students, conduct orientations, and, with the aid of a part-time secretary, track all students' progress through the program. The MPA Director and secretary also coordinate all admissions and degree-granting processes with the UW Graduate School and the Registrar. The half-time MPA secretary is co-funded by SES and the Arts & Sciences College. (1)

The School of Extended Studies handles all registration processes for students enrolling in distance courses. It advertises course offerings around the state, occasionally conducts recruitment campaigns, arranges book orders and distribution of assigned reading materials to students, arranges use of UW vehicles for faculty, and manages teleconference classroom sites around the state. It also submits course-grade reports to the Registrar. SES also allocates and coordinates the use of all distance-education technology. This now includes audio and video teleconferencing, preparation of video-taped presentations, coordination of satellite downlinks with the state government, web-based computer "Documents" and "Threads" programs (to be explained), and classroom use of computers and optel equipment.

SES teleconference sites are dispersed throughout the state, some housed in community colleges, others in public schools or other local public facilities. Each site has a field representative who arranges course registration, test monitors, building/classroom access, on-line library system access, and web access.

Library access is a major issue in distance education. If on-site browsing through the stacks is essential, no amount of long-distance communication will suffice. However, for many research purposes, various web-based indexes to periodicals and documents are available virtually anywhere. Distance MPA students have electronic access to all UW library

collections, and to a much larger data-base of the Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries (CARL). The UW library system provides an energetic and responsive outreach service to students throughout the state. For example, a student in Cody (approx. 400 miles from Laramie) can use an on-line journal index to obtain a citation. He then e-mails the UW Library Outreach office. Library personnel find the journal, make a photocopy of the article, and send it to the student *gratis*. Another student, living 250 miles away in Gillette, needs a book that is not part of the University collection. Via e-mail she completes an inter-library loan request and after the book reaches campus, the Outreach office sends it to her. This system seems to work quite well for MPA students, and reduces substantially the concerns related to meeting NASPAA accreditation standards.

### **Administrative Problems**

The Distance MPA program copes with a variety of administrative difficulties arising from the relations among diverse subunits of the university. Problems with SES, Registration & Records, and the Graduate School deserve attention.

SES receives only limited financial support from budgeted funds. This unit is expected to raise additional funds through tuition, and to use that money to pay instructors, purchase and maintain equipment, support instructor travel as needed, etc. This funding structure compels SES to expect larger class sizes than comparable on-campus classes. For example, SES generally requires a minimum of 17 students per course, but often expresses a desire to admit 25 to 30 students per course. In comparison, minimums for on campus courses are 10 students for undergraduate classes and 5 students for graduate courses. This policy has been an ongoing obstacle in our efforts to offer specialized and/or experimental courses in the off-campus setting. On several occasions we have had to cancel courses due to low enrollments even though the same courses would not have been canceled in the on-campus setting.

A second, and related, problem is that SES has also established a minimum enrollment per site for video courses. This policy is driven by the connection charges which are fixed (by the state) regardless of the number of students at the site. Recently, a student trying to complete the elective portion of his program had two courses canceled because he was the only

student at the site. Taken together, these kinds of institutional constraints create significant barriers against offering the same range of curricula to all off-campus students who might be interested in the degree.

A third problem involves the treatment of on-campus students in SES processes. SES focuses its attention on off-campus students. Difficulties ensued as the MPA faculty began merging on-campus students into distance courses. On-campus students often do not receive mailings of important off-campus course information. They also often do not show up on class rosters. Furthermore, on-campus students enrolling in off-campus courses sometimes disappear from on-campus enrollment records. Because many of them are full-time, and on some kind of financial aid, their benefits are cut off until their enrollment status is cleared up. This can sometimes take up to a week. Similar problems occur for off-campus students who occasionally enroll in on-campus courses. SES is not entirely responsible for these problems. The Registrar's office maintains a separate records-keeping system (apparently in separate offices) for off-campus students. All of this is complicated for SES by the fact that they receive none of the tuition revenue of on-campus students enrolling in off-campus courses. They receive no resources for handling these students. The faculty have yet to discover a power at UW capable of changing this arrangement.

A related problem is that most on-campus officials are accustomed to dealing with 18-22 year old traditional students. Some tend, therefore, to be a bit officious and paternalistic. This manner does not sit well with older, non-traditional students. To cope with these kinds of problems, the MPA faculty have routed all off-campus student interaction with the campus through a very capable MPA secretary who plays ombudsperson. This has substantially reduced, though not eliminated, student difficulties.

The UW Graduate School posed additional problems. In the early years of the MPA distance program, the Graduate Dean openly expressed skepticism about off-campus graduate programs, and especially about professional degree programs. This resulted in attempts to establish campus residency requirements, legalistic restrictions on admission, and a traditional model of graduate study based in the sciences. Fortunately, the upper administration quashed the residency proposal. Legalistic restrictions have focused on strict enforcement of minimum GRE scores and undergraduate GPAs for admission. Neither is helpful in predicting

academic performance of non-traditional students, but rules are rules. The science-based model of graduate study puts a six-year limit on students to complete their degree. It assumes that the knowledge in the field will have changed substantially beyond that period, thereby rendering old coursework obsolete. The requirement posed problems for some off-campus students who could not maintain a steady part-time pace through the curriculum. The problem was more common with the "Plan B" paper requirement. Off-campus students often failed to complete the project before the six-year limit. The institution of the Capstone course to replace that Plan B process has significantly reduced the problem. The recent accession of a new Graduate Dean also shows promise for enhanced support of off-campus programs.

### **Teaching and Learning in the Distance-MPA Classroom**

Due to inexperience and apprehensiveness about teaching exclusively through audio/video teleconferencing technology, the MPA faculty decided to add an "intensive weekend" component to each state-wide course. That is, students and faculty converge on a location most central to the enrollment pattern of the course for a weekend session beginning on Friday afternoon or evening and continuing through Saturday, and in some cases, through Sunday morning. Forster and Washington (2000) argue that "... the major constraint of distance education is lack of face-to-face, 'natural' interaction" (p. 9) (*see also Wagner, 1997; Freitas, Myers, and Avtgis, 1998; Farber, 1998*). Our experience reflected this finding and in an effort to mitigate this obstacle each distance course usually consists of five or six 3-hour teleconference sessions and two intensive weekend sessions. The courses usually commence with an introductory audio or video session to discuss the syllabus and get students started on reading and writing assignments, followed by an intensive weekend session a few weeks later. Since building class camaraderie is particularly difficult in the distance learning environment, the early intensive weekend session allows students and faculty to establish personal and classroom rapport, thereby making subsequent teleconference sessions more enjoyable to conduct (*see also Forster and Washington 2000*). At this initial face-to-face meeting thorough introductions of each student are made. Since Wyoming has been characterized as a "small city connected by really long streets" students find that, through these introductions, few differences exist in professional and personal experience. During these



weekends the host students (students who live closest to the intensive weekend site) provide refreshments, and in some venues faculty convene dinner at local restaurants to help build social and professional ties among the participants.

The MPA faculty have maintained this policy, and are convinced that it is vital to effective learning in distance-degree graduate programs. Exit surveys (taken since 1992) and informal feedback indicate that most students consider the intensive weekends the best part of the program. Not only do they prefer the personal interaction, they highly prize the network of collegial friendships that develop in the process. These often persist well beyond the program, and have resulted in the formation of a fairly active student/alumni association which holds both social and professional gatherings periodically. This does not mean that the weekends are unproblematic. Students do occasionally complain about the additional costs of hotel and meals, plus the loss of work and family time. It is not unusual for students to both praise and lament the weekends.

The MPA faculty use teleconferencing technology only as a supplemental component of each course. All believe strongly that audio and video teleconferencing are second-best alternatives to teaching in person, and according to Fredolino and Sutherland (2000), "students prefer face-to-face instruction when compared directly to video instruction" (*p. 116*). This seems especially true when offering an entire degree program off campus. Many distance courses at UW are offered exclusively through audio and video teleconferencing. This may be acceptable for courses offered on a stand-alone basis, or perhaps as part of a certificate-training program. But in our minds offering an entire graduate degree program through distance learning requires at least moderate amounts of personal interaction in order for students to reap all the benefits of graduate education.

As the faculty grew in experience with distance-learning technology, they also discovered that some courses were more amenable to it than others (*see also Fredolino and Sutherland, 2000*). For example, the Ethics in Government course has moved to a three-weekend format with only one introductory teleconference session. The faculty discovered that the course content required much more personal interaction than in his other courses. Furthermore, other courses, such as methods and budgeting, require more

logistical planning due to use of computers and graphics technology in class sessions. This may lead professors in these fields to prefer in-person sessions, but we also know that such courses are now routinely offered via teleconferencing and the WEB at more and more universities.

In the end, we believe that distance-education technology can still be used for a satisfactory learning experience in graduate degree programs if used in conjunction with the in-person interaction. Freitas, Myers, and Avtgis (1998) argue that, "... distance learning not only separates the instructor from students, but from other students as well" (p. 367). Their finding only highlights the importance of the intensive weekend and we contend that the familiarity and rapport cultivated through the weekend sessions carries over to teleconference sessions. But it does take extra effort to make the teleconference sessions work.

### **The Technology/Pedagogy Interface**

Distance courses at UW are conducted mainly through audio and video teleconferencing equipment. The audio system connects sites on campus with established sites around the state. However, the flexibility of audio technology permits a wide array of arrangements. For instance, we had an Air Force student who was transferred to Japan before he took the Capstone course. He completed that course from Japan via the phone lines. He did have to return by air for an intensive weekend, and for his oral defense, but the audio portion greatly reduced his travel costs and scheduling problems. It is also possible for students to connect from their homes, or, if traveling, from a motel room. The same is true, of course, for the instructor. The obvious disadvantage of the audio format is its *faceless* character. The instructor and students are reduced to disembodied voices that emanate from speakers at the various sites.

Video conferencing offers the obvious advantage of live interaction in a visual format. The system also has computer capability which allows the use of graphic and digital teaching aids—items often needed in budgeting and methods courses. While it is an improvement over the audio system, it also has some limitations and problems – even beyond the typical concern that "... the screen can never offer us anything more than a virtual image" (Farber, 1998, p. 808). One limitation is the quality of the video image. Rather than transmitting the signal over air waves or cable, the

system uses telephone lines. Their narrow signal bandwidth causes a slight delay in the signal which makes the images appear “jerky.” Moreover, the audio signal arrives before the video, and thus the words are slightly out of synchronization with the lip movements. We have been told that video signals transmitted through fiber optic cable produce an image of almost real-time quality, so this problem may not exist in many urban areas.

Another limitation is that the video system requires dedicated sites. UW has eight sites around the state. This situation leads to two basic problems. First, since some areas in the state do not have access to video, students in those areas are either precluded from the courses, or they have to connect to the class through an audio-only link. An audio-only link complicates the video classroom environment a bit because it is easy to forget about the audio-only student(s). Second, it presents a fairly typical scarce-resource allocation problem—as more courses are offered, the availability of the system decreases.

Video and audio conferencing, in conjunction with intensive weekends, form the technological backbone of the distance-MPA program. However, computer technology adds an important and growing complement. Email, for example, provides an extremely effective vehicle for the exchange of course papers. The regular mail system can add several days to the turn-around time. With email the time factor disappears. This helps immensely with courses involving many smaller writing projects rather than one big one.

MPA students (on- and off-campus) have increasingly adopted email as their preferred mode of contacting faculty outside of class. At base, email conversations provide the best of both worlds—students and faculty can contact each other at their own convenience. Faculty have also found that students who are shy or timid in class, tend to be more “talkative” over email. (2) This has prompted experiments with independent study courses and with components of standard courses that have been quite successful. When dealing with two or more students, faculty can promote interaction among all concerned through the “Threads” program, which provides a password-secured chat room. In either case, students and faculty communicate more frequently and often with more quality than under traditional on-campus formats. All of this, however, is premised upon an already-established rapport with the students.

A new and very promising dimension of computer technology has emerged in just the last year. Working through SES, faculty can now electronically post one copy of any article or book chapter on a "Documents" program which is secured for access only by enrolled students. The students reach Documents through the UW/SES homepage, and download a copy of each reading for their personal use. So far, publishers are willing to forego copyright clearance procedures with this service as long as access remains secured. That solves what has been a major inconvenience for faculty and students in distance programs. The only drawback is getting the articles accurately digitized. OCR scanners do not always make clean and accurate electronic copies, so proofreading and correction can add considerable time to course preparation.

In general, we think the combination of computer and fiber optic technology shows the greatest promise for distance learning. Evidence for this contention may be found in studies which show that those involved in distance learning around the country have indicated a "clear preference" for these technologies (*Rahm & Reed, 1997, p. 463*).

### **Assessing the Electronic Classroom**

Overall, our assessment of learning in the electronic classroom is positive. Using the primary objective of graduate education—mastery of the subject matter—as a standard, we believe that the electronic classroom works. Our experience parallels that of other studies which suggest that students do as well in a distance education classroom as they do in the on-campus setting (*see, for example, Dominguez and Ridley, 1999; Merisotis and Phipps, 1999*). (3) Evidence from tests, papers, case analyses, and class discussions shows that off-campus students do as well or better than on-campus students. Evaluations of courses by off-campus students also suggest that they believe they can learn what they need to through the electronic format (see Table 2).

**Table 2**  
**Selected Characteristics of Graduates Since 1991**

	Mean G.P.A.	Male	Female	N=
Off-Campus Part Time	3.82	76	81	157
On-Campus Part Time	3.83	10	16	26
On-Campus Full Time	3.85	16	10	26
Total		102	107	209

Note: Minus and plus grades are not given at the University of Wyoming. Also, students cannot graduate with a GPA below 3.0 and a student can receive a maximum of two Cs during the program. GPA ranged from 3.03 to 4.0.

At the same time, using the admittedly more subjective standard of the *quality* of the educational experience, we remain uncomfortable with the electronic classroom. Despite efforts to minimize differences, distance and traditional classroom environments are not equal environments and never will be as long as the interactions between students and faculty take place through electronically mediated space. We believe this for several reasons.

Efforts aimed at developing meaningful classroom interaction in the cyber-classroom are physically and intellectually draining. Not unlike more traditional graduate education, a successful classroom experience (for both faculty and students) takes energy and a motivated instructor. In traditional classroom settings the mental and physical energy expended by the instructor is often quickly and immediately replenished by students. This “refueling” takes place in a variety of ways, including everything from the simple head-nod, to eye contact, to the interruption of a professor by a student who says, “Yes, that makes sense” (perhaps a rare occurrence but rewarding nonetheless).

In a distance format, the energy goes out, but its return, and thus the refueling, is somewhat more elusive because of lack of proximity. In the cyber-classroom the intimacy and spontaneity of the relationship is reduced or missing altogether (*see also Freitas, Myers, and Avtgis, 1998*). Even when you have “live” students sitting with you in the compressed video or audio-teleconference room, the immediacy of the response is muted by the

architecture of the electronic classroom. (4) Students may not be looking at you (they are often looking at other students on the video screen or at the table-audio unit instead of the instructor), or they may be thinking about how and when it is appropriate to press “the button” which activates their audio microphones for speaking. In short, the technology and the peculiar cyber-classroom environment mitigates the immediacy and subtlety of students’ responses. As a result, faculty expend an inordinate amount of energy with less meaningful feedback.

MPA faculty have adapted to this situation by including more case studies, roleplays, and scenarios which are designed to boost verbal interaction in lieu of more subtle feedback. On balance, these techniques work much better than simple lectures and discussion. However, faculty attitudes differ. Some feel the electronic classroom simply presents new challenges which can be largely, though not totally, overcome. The problems are simply different from what faculty have become accustomed to in traditional classrooms. In fact, some of the new methods employed in distance classrooms have been successful enough that we have brought them into the traditional classroom as well. But other faculty see the problems of the distance classroom as intractable. It will always be far more difficult to achieve levels of interaction typically gained in traditional classrooms. They continually doubt whether the students “out there” are really getting anything out the sessions.

Success in the cyber-classroom also requires more logistical planning, different use of university resources (e.g., library access), and heightened sensitivities to classroom responsibilities on the part of both students and faculty. In an effort to prepare faculty for the electronic classroom, the School of Extended Studies makes sure faculty who offer electronically mediated classes get instruction on special pedagogical techniques, logistical concerns, and technology training. For example, to foster student input from around the state, faculty should “call on specific sites around the state in order to elicit responses.” Further, we are requested to submit syllabi six weeks before the semester begins and place book orders well in advance in order to accommodate sending books long distances. If teaching on video, we are asked to wear shirts without stripes and of a color other than white because it will “bloom” in the bright lights. Faculty are also asked to be in class 15-20 minutes before it is scheduled to begin and to make certain they do not go over the allotted time less they

interfere with the next scheduled course. These and other details are considered important, especially for professors who are just becoming acquainted with the electronic classroom.

However, what new responsibilities do students have in the cyber-environment? Early in the move to video-teleconferencing, SES assigned instructional designers to give brief orientations to students and faculty at the opening session of courses. They covered classroom etiquette, but the whole presentation seemed silly to faculty and students alike. Some of us think classroom etiquette needs to evolve with experience. Thus far, students tend to treat the electronic educational experience in one of two ways. First, they attempt to re-enact the traditional classroom experience. In doing so, small sidebar conversations may take place (hopefully subject related) or they might make subject-oriented comments that are not broadcast to the rest of the class (a small comment, perhaps a quip, does not seem to warrant pressing the button and thereby interrupting all discussion - which in effect it does). Although often times acceptable in a traditional seminar, these actions have the effect of minimizing the student's overall interaction in the session. Second, some students seem to treat the cyber-experience as if they were watching television in the privacy of their own homes. And as Forster and Washington maintain (2000), "common television watching behaviors can prove a major obstacle to retaining students' attention" (*p. 156*). As a result, students may talk with each other, get up for refreshments, or read books and newspapers unrelated to class while the "show" is on. A few students have also been known to engage in horseplay, listen to basketball games on the radio, and yell epithets at fellow students and the instructor while the microphones are turned off. They exhibit these behaviors because the professor is not in "their" classroom - instead, he or she is on television or on an audio-conference connection which they control.

Faculty reactions to both approaches differ. Some think the students are distracted in either case. Others are less concerned about these matters because they are getting satisfactory performance in class exercises, on tests, and on writing projects. In the end, cultivating an appropriate decorum of class interaction is more challenging in the electronic classroom, and very much a matter of the subjective disposition of each faculty member. All agree, however, that the electronic classroom environment remains a second-best alternative to personal interaction.

The problems associated with electronic classrooms are not fatal to distance education. Many of them may eventually be overcome, but it will take time and much experimentation. In the meantime, MPA faculty around the country should know about them, and build in as many mitigative factors as possible. Furthermore, administrators should regard these matters seriously as they ponder how to entice faculty to engage in distance education at all.

### **Personnel Challenges**

A nagging problem for college and university administrators is how to get faculty interested in distance education. How do you keep the faculty you hire when to all their responsibilities you add the time and energy associated with distance education? That is a much easier question to ask than to answer. Nevertheless, a number of points need mention here.

The UW MPA faculty have built a commitment among themselves to distance education for a number of reasons. These do not apply equally in force to each member, but are nonetheless important in overall effect. First, all of us perceived a real and substantial need for public administration education in the state. This became clear initially when over 350 people showed up for meetings held around the state to discuss the possibility of offering the MPA statewide. Over 120 of these subsequently enrolled in our first course offering. We could make a real change for the better in Wyoming.

Second, in 1987, the two initial faculty responsible for the distance program were enthused about the prospect of hiring up to three new faculty and boosting the MPA curriculum accordingly. In making the hires, they screened applicants carefully for possible interest in distance education. Hiring faculty with the expectation that distance education will form a major part of their responsibilities greatly strengthens the probability of success. Some faculty discover, of course, that they still prefer on-campus teaching, but may remain willing and able to teach in the distance-learning environment.

Third, and more importantly, some faculty discover that they like off-campus teaching as well or better than teaching on-campus. Off-



campus teaching affords faculty an extraordinary degree of independence from the structure of on-campus life. Distance courses may be scheduled much more flexibly than on-campus courses. Office hours are held more meaningfully on email and by phone, and thereby require less time at the office. A few of the faculty actually spend more time at their “in-home” office than they do at their campus offices. They can connect to the rest of the world through modem access to UW’s mainframe. Furthermore, some faculty enjoy traveling to intensive weekends, especially in a state with so much scenic beauty.

Fourth, some of the MPA faculty thoroughly enjoy the intensive-weekend sessions. They find they can integrate a broad range of important subjects and activities, and learn to engage students more actively in the class than they ever could with traditional campus courses. This has led occasionally to use of intensive weekends on campus as well. Intensive weekend sessions have also evolved as more relaxed class settings. The faculty have also discovered that students can get up and move about during a session without disturbing others, and actually refresh their attention spans as a result. All this makes teaching and learning much more enjoyable.

Fifth, the MPA faculty have cultivated a strong collegiality which provides a professionally satisfying work environment. We know we are part of something that makes a difference. The collegiality persists mainly because each member brings a pragmatic attitude to the program. That attitude is guided by an over-arching commitment to MPA students and our own professional development. We are willing to experiment to make things work better for them as well as for ourselves. As a result, the faculty have engaged in a give-and-take which allows each to focus mainly on their interests and strengths, without losing commitment to the group and program.. Thus, for example, if a faculty member wants to spend more time in on-campus work, others willingly step in to take more off-campus work, at least for a time. Work arrangements ebb and flow according to these changing needs. On balance, all contribute strongly to on- and off-campus education.

Finally, a teaching load of two courses per semester has made the extra work involved in distance learning more palatable. Many colleges and universities in the western states require at least a 3-2 or 3-3 teaching load. In addition, new faculty in the department are given a “research

semester” free from teaching after their second year. Faculty, therefore, can give more sustained effort to their research agendas, and have more time to adjust to the distance-learning environment.

It should be evident that most of these factors are intrinsic rather than extrinsic. We believe distance learning can succeed if such intrinsic rewards are perceived and valued by the faculty who are targeted for involvement. Such rewards cannot be commanded. They must be elicited. Simply telling existing faculty that they now have distance-education responsibilities will not work. This has been tried in a number of programs at UW, and with little success. The faculty will give it minimal effort, and do what they can to make the matter go away quietly due to lack of interest on all sides. That, of course, comes about due to a self-fulfilling prophecy—professors show off-campus students, usually in subtle ways, that they do not want to be involved in distance education, and the students eventually lose interest.

We also know that intrinsic factors work, because there are few extrinsic rewards offered for distance education by the UW administration. Technically, faculty who teach off-campus graduate courses are given extra credits pursuant to a “minimum workload policy” established at UW. But this is a benefit on paper only, and considered meaningless by faculty. The faculty receive no extra remuneration or benefit for teaching in a distance-learning program. When we teach overload distance courses (usually during the summer), we actually get paid less per course than when teaching on campus. This happens because SES operates on a different financial basis than the on-campus system does.

We believe the lack of extrinsic rewards reflects a failure by the administration to back its commitment to distance learning with significant resources. This has been a source of great frustration to faculty. We put in more work per distance course than is typical for on-campus instruction, yet receive no meaningful extrinsic rewards for it. As mentioned above, the 2-2 teaching load helps mitigate the severity of this problem, but most traditional, on-campus faculty have the same load. Rumor has it that the 2-2 teaching load will soon disappear at UW, due to increased demands for teaching, and decreased faculty lines. If that comes to pass, the MPA distance program could face serious problems. It will be more difficult to recruit new faculty to such a program when traditional on-campus positions

are available elsewhere, and the existing faculty will find the distance classroom less enticing due to the disproportionate effect of the increased load.

## Conclusion

The success of the UW MPA distance-education program arises from a confluence of factors which should be carefully considered by those who may attempt distance education elsewhere. First, there existed in the state and region a real need for distance education. That need was expressed more by constituents than by university administrators seeking to expand “market share.” That sense of real need aroused the interest of faculty. Market share interests administrators more than faculty, and the motivation is largely driven out of fear of loss rather than from the desire to meet real needs. We understand that loss of resources to universities can be significant, and usually hurts faculty more than administrators. But administrators need to recognize that these fears are profoundly less inspiring to faculty. It will be more difficult to elicit strong commitment among faculty to distance education in that environment.

Second, some factors in this success are unique to Wyoming—for example, UW being the only university in the state makes the distance mission that much more compelling. However, every college and university will have unique factors to consider which may either enhance or detract from a distance education mission. Distance programs will have to be tailored to those unique characteristics, whatever they may be. The point is to find out early what the unique factors are and try to mitigate them or capitalize on them depending on their nature.

Third, college and university administrators can dramatically increase the odds of success at distance learning by directing real resources and extrinsic rewards to the targeted faculty. For example, pay them supplemental stipends for each distance course. Iowa State University, for instance, pays professors an additional \$2000 per distance course (*Rahm & Reed, 1998*), while the University of Wisconsin-Stout pays an additional \$1,000 (*Sedlak and Cartwright, 1997, p. 56*). Forster and Washington argue that “salary supplements or other forms of incentives can promote faculty’s embrace of distance education” (*p. 157*). Also, provide them development money for each new course they bring to the distance

program. The first distance-course preparations are extremely demanding and require significant adaptation. Faculty should also be paid a decent per diem for travel expenses, and they should have computer equipment capable of running email and web-based programs quickly and efficiently. Such carrots will draw far more faculty interest.

Fourth, once some interest has been cultivated, administrators need to listen carefully to the faculty about the intrinsic factors that will make the electronic classroom more tolerable, and interaction with distance students more enjoyable. Accommodating faculty on these matters is vital to program success. Conversely, administrators should be careful to avoid any de-motivating factors. Among the most critical is avoiding any attempt to monitor course content in ways which might be perceived as threatening academic freedom. As a result of web-based intellectual property and related matters, fear of such intrusion is not unwarranted among faculty.

Fifth, it is also vital that the program director be thoroughly committed to distance learning, and that she or he be willing to experiment and give lots of room to faculty to do distance learning their way. The director needs to facilitate more than “manage.” Deans and department chairs must also try to buffer faculty from the pressures which drive higher administration officials to hasty decisions regarding distance education (*Rahm & Reed, 1997, p. 472*). Nothing will kill a distance education project faster than rushed efforts which lack forethought and a developed operational infrastructure.

Sixth, administrators should expect difficulty in merging distance-learning systems with the on-campus administrative systems. These will entail conflicts in perspective (e.g., between treatment of older non-traditional and younger traditional students) as well as among bureaucratic routines. Students will greatly appreciate any extent to which these problems can be resolved.

Finally, faculty and administrators should remain open to new technologies and trends in distance education. Some of these show great promise as well as foreboding. For example, we believe that Web-based courses will eventually supplant audio and video teleconferenced courses. Technologically, the Web provides a vehicle for delivering courses to virtually (pun intended) anyone with a computer and modem. Moreover,

the combination of the abundant sources of information already available on the Web, and newer developments like electronic journals and books, makes it possible for students anywhere to access all the materials they need. It also seems that the impersonal character of the Web allows people to shed some of their inhibitions. They say things to each other on the Web that they would not likely say in a face-to-face encounter. This aspect leads to a kind of honesty and frankness in Web conversation that might be used very fruitfully in coursework. As mentioned earlier, we have already discovered this in email/Threads correspondence. Shy people tend to open up on line.

Our conviction that distance education programs must integrate personal interaction with electronic interaction need not preclude the use of Web-based courses. It is perfectly conceivable, for example, that MPA students could avail themselves of Web courses for elective credit. Students can currently take entirely teleconferenced-based elective courses from non-MPA faculty. The Web could boost the UW MPA program's electives, and perhaps even enable us to identify specialty tracks which were previously unavailable. It is also conceivable that we could create our own Web-based instructional units for each required course as a substitute for teleconferencing. Only time and experimentation will tell.

### Notes

1. In a recent budget cycle, the Arts and Science's Dean eliminated funding for the half-time position. Currently, we are still experimenting with the best arrangement for managing the loss of this position.
2. Many Internet users are also discovering this tendency. A recent Denver Post article noted how the anonymity of the Internet has made frank discussions of sensitive subjects, like race, more common. The Internet may become an important new public forum for such issues (*see Michel Marriot, Special Report, The Denver Post, Sunday, March 8, 1998, pp. 2A, 24A*).
3. Farber (1998) makes a compelling and important argument that distance learning can provide "measurable competence" but not

“education” (p. 807). Many (but not all) of us agree with Farber’s concern.

4. For an interesting discussion on a lack of non-verbal immediacy in the electronic classroom see Freitas, Myers, and Avtgis (1998).

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