A Study on Support from a Distant Learning Department at a Hispanic-Serving Institution

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Article Info	Abstract
	Online programs have made a lasting impact on institutions of higher learning for several decades. This ethnographic qualitative study focused on the development and support of a distance learning department at a Hispanic-serving institution. The study aimed to identify unique organizational elements specific to this Hispanic-serving institution. The findings were significant, revealing that the Distance Learning department, operating under an "academic umbrella", functioned as a comprehensive hub for both faculty and student support, offering a wide range of services including technical and instructional technology support. Furthermore, the study found that the department's placement under the "academic umbrella" not only centralized support but also lightened professors' coursework loads by assisting students with instructional technology support.

Introduction

Online programs have been steadily rising over the past decade, and they are not just a passing trend (Mayadas et al., p. 49, 2009; Moloney & Oakley, 2010). This surge in students, many of whom are part-time or non-traditional, has opened new possibilities for online universities. In response, traditional universities are innovating, developing fully online programs that are supported and delivered through their campuses. Online instruction, with its distinct differences from traditional classrooms (Yuan & Nie, 2021), is a testament to the evolution of education. It's a methodology that aligns with educational foundations and contributes to the success of the 21st-century student.

At the forefront of these efforts are distance education departments, a unique blend of educational pedagogies and information technology (Flowers & Baltzer, 2006). These departments operate with a keen understanding of the rapidly changing online environments. The departments and adapt seamlessly, ensuring minimal disruption to the delivery of courses and programs.

Collaboration is a cornerstone of distance education, with the organization managing technology and pedagogical methodologies in tandem. This historical examination of a successful academic technology support department at Southern University (pseudonym) will provide a roadmap for institutions at various stages of distance education integration. The study aims to critically examine the distance education support department of a Hispanic-serving institution (HSI) and identify the unique organizational elements of the environment.

Review of Literature

Hispanic-Serving Institutions

Hispanic-serving institutions, a unique category of educational institutions, are defined as those that enroll at least 25% of Hispanic students and where 50% of students are from low-income backgrounds (Higher Education Act, Amendments, 1998; Excelencia in Education, 2019). In a significant move in 1998, Congress authorized the amendment of the Higher Education Act of 1965, introducing TITLE V, a distinct program for Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs). TITLE V was divided into two parts: PART A, which comprises the HSI program, and PART B, which supports the expansion of post-baccalaureate educational opportunities for Hispanic students (Higher Education Act, Amendments, 1998).

Because of the new amendment of 1998, HSIs could apply for and receive individual institutional development grants, funds to support cooperative agreements with other Hispanic-serving institutions, as well as one-year planning grants to support future grant applications (Higher Education Act, Amendments, 1998). This opened the doors for economic support through federal funding to the HSIs, underscoring their crucial role in the economic development of Hispanic communities. Granted a non-profit status, HSIs are recognized to provide economic support for the educational needs of Hispanic communities (Dayton et al., 2004).

Looking ahead to the year 2030, it is projected that one in every five Americans will be Hispanic, potentially serving as a primary driving force for the economy (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). The realization of this potential depends on the quality of education, which needs to be improved to meet the population's needs. The success of the U.S. economy, moving forward, will have a substantial reliance upon HSIs , which are comprised of 60% student population who identify as Hispanic (De Los Santos & De Los Santos, 2003). An HSI plays a crucial role in ensuring academic opportunities for the populations it represents. Texas, with the second-largest Hispanic population in the country (Texas Demographic Center, n.d.), is a clear example of how the success of higher education institutions and overall opportunities for that growing demographic are directly impacted.

Distance Learning in Higher Education

Distance education is not a new concept in higher education by any standard; it is traced back to the late nineteenth century. There have been several evolutions of distance education over the years, beginning with correspondence study to the online delivery method of today. For instance, courses in literature, history, and mathematics were delivered via mail, with students submitting their assignments and receiving feedback through the postal service. The postal service played a crucial role in correspondence courses delivered from both for-profit and non-for-profit institutions of higher education. The reliability and economic benefits of delivering via mail directly resemble closely the railroads that began crossing the country. Many of these first courses or programs were delivering courses to advance their employees ' skills and training. By the latter part of the 1960s, it was clear that distance education had carved out its place in educational instructional technology. New instructional theories and pedagogies for technology began to emerge. Two experiments in distance education solidified the use of

communication technologies for educational purposes. The Articulated Instructional Media Project (AIM) and Great Britain's Open University (OU) would provide the research to support the new distance education opportunities brought forth by the changing landscape of technology across the globe (Harry et al., 1993; Moore & Kearsley, 2012). As technology continued its advancement from large mainframe computers to personal computers for offices and homes, networks of internet access began to take shape.

In 1981, IBM's VNET launched the Because It's Time NETwork, (BITNET) primarily used for internal communications. BITNET played a crucial role in the early development of distance education, connecting the first two universities, Duke University and City University of New York (CUNY), to its network. Initially, BITNET connected Yale University to CUNY, but its reach soon expanded, with thousands of computers across the U.S. being connected to BITNET. This supercomputer network was dedicated solely to education, and by 1991, it had linked over 3,000 institutions (Moore &Kearsley, 2011). The development of the worldwide web from these supercomputer networks gave distance education its most significant opportunity. The World Wide Web system allowed for a document to be accessed across any distance with different software, operational systems, and resolutions. In the 1990's, universities began delivering web-based programs, and many of those evolved from the telecourses and teleconferencing programs already functioning. The Jones International University (JIU) became the first fully accredited online university in 1995 (Pittman, 2013; Feasley & Bunker, 2013; Black, 2003).

In 2003, the U.S. Department of Education reported a staggering figure-distance education course enrollments had surpassed three million (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2003). The following academic year, 56% of all 2-year and 4-year TITLE IV-eligible, degree-granting institutions offered distance education courses (Allen & Seaman, 2003). By 2006-2007, two-thirds (66 percent) of 2-year and 4-year Title IV degree-granting postsecondary institutions reported offering online, hybrid/blended online, or other distance education courses for any level or audience, an increase of 10 percent (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2006).

In fall 2012, approximately 15.2% of all degree-seeking undergraduate students were enrolled in at least one distance education course. By the fall of 2019, this percentage had increased to 36%. This significant increase in the adoption of distance education among undergraduate students has several implications for higher education institutions. It underscores the need for institutions to invest in the necessary infrastructure and support systems to ensure the quality and effectiveness of distance education. However, during 2020, the number of undergraduate students who were enrolled in at least one distance education course increased dramatically to 75%. This was largely attributed to the Corona Virus Pandemic which required students to immediately move to online instruction. But by fall 2021, the percentage had decreased to 61% of undergraduate students taking at least one distance education course. This decrease could be attributed to most universities opening their doors for on-campus instruction, as the pandemic situation improved.

The increased demand for higher education faculty to enhance their courses with online materials or deliver their courses using hybrid or online constructs is a testament to their adaptability and innovation. The integration of technology continues to impact all systems; academic and non-academic. Furthermore, faculty are expanding their

roles to designers, interpreters, change agents, mentors, and motivators (Allen & Seaman, 2003; Connick, 1997; Twigg, 2002; Porter et al., 2003). As the faculty roles expand, their access and resources must increase in quality and quantity. This multifaceted instructor requires a support team to simplify, identify, and explore the best educational technology practices. Failure to develop adequate support systems for students (Aggarwal, 2001) and faculty (Palloff & Pratt, 2002; Fuller, 2000) when an institution has invested in the technology it is calling for mediocrity at best and disaster at worst (Watkins et al., 2013).

Distance Education Support Departments in Higher Education

As technology impacts the instructional development of faculty, many find their roles expanding. Instructors are restructuring assessments, assignments, and activities, researching the technologies available to them, and developing materials consistent with the face-to-face environment with little to no guidance. Traditional institutions develop internal systems with the capacity to supply the students and faculty with quality distance learning support (Tait, 2003). However, there are apparent disconnects regarding what specific skills or knowledge areas, referred to as 'disciplined specializations ', are necessary for the best functionality of the department. Berger and Mrozowskis (2001) conducted a comprehensive review of research from 1990-1999 and found there was no support department combination of technology and strategic teaching practices in an online environment. The two areas remained separate but highly dependent upon one another's effectiveness.

Tait and Mills (2003) found a significant exclusion of faculty support for distance education outside of how to use the software and computers (Merkley et al., 1997). According to Hoare (2001), virtual learning will not replace face-to-face entirely, and as its popularity contributes to the expansion of for-profit online programs in the U.S. and continues to rise, it challenges traditional universities to compete for the non-traditional student. Growth rates of nontraditional students at commuter colleges and universities have increased over the last twenty years. Grzeda and Miller (2009) conducted a study based on an online MBA program, which indicated that flexibility is the most important deciding factor students have for selecting online programs. Additionally, older students (more than 32 years of age) and women showed to have a secondary emerging factor of shortened times of completion (Grzeda, & Miller, 2009). Researchers have concluded that the advent of online has been a very significant realization of the 21st century. This technological innovation has increased learning opportunities, supporting education to occur at any time and from anywhere. The positive learning outcomes of students enrolled in online programs are essential to the programs' success, thus impacting the equity of the communities in which the learners are located (Alomari, 2024).

The organizational elements of these support departments are a mechanism comprised of more than one discipline's collaborative attributions that inform the instructors' abilities in a virtual environment. Higher education of the 21st century is traveling at a warp speed. The implications of faculty preparedness to accommodate the new additions to their roles in academia rely upon the support departments. These departments must be equipped to provide support in a language and at a level of interpretation that is easily applied and learned. The need for comprehensive support systems in higher education institutions is urgent and crucial for the successful adaptation to technology (Gillespie et al., 2010; Sorcinelli et al., 2006; Steinert et al., 2006). (Gillespie

et al., 2010; Sorcinelli et al., 2006; Steinert et al., 2006) The knowledge base of staff at these support departments must be familiar with the pedagogies and the technology best suited for the achievement of the objectives of the course curriculum.

Evaluation of instructors' experiences with online designated supportive departments found both full-time and adjunct instructors expressed an alarming lack of knowledge of instructional methods and collegial standards of the staff. The focus was more on the mechanical and technical aspects, such as navigating the learning management system or troubleshooting technical issues, of the delivery systems (Lei & Gupta, 2010; Terosky & Heasley, 2015). This furthers the discourse of institutional support between the importance of maintaining the integrity of the profession and preparation for instructors' development of skills required for the more technically challenging environment.

Leadership must avoid using modern technology as the resolution to educational issues or as the supporting factor to create a distance education program but as an implementation to achieve the desired results. Otherwise, there is no evidence of the need to support the change (Watkins et al., 2013; Eckel et al., 1999). The importance of research-based strategic planning cannot be overstated. It is the only acceptable evidence to create successful change within institutions (Watkins et al., 2013). Successful changes require a clear vision, need, and commitment to a collaborative development process that includes the stakeholders; however, it may still have a fragmented execution.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used was the Organizational Identity Theory (OIT) , which provides an insight into the historical, cultural, and projected future of distance education (Albert & Whetten, 1985). According to Albert and Whetten (1985), organizational identity is portrayed as a collection of statements perceived by members of an organization to be fundamentally unique, and long-lasting. This definition underlines three pivotal elements: centrality, distinctiveness, and durability. Centrality denotes that the assertions should capture features deemed significant and indispensable to the organization. Identity, as a portrayal of central attributes, explains what holds utmost importance and vitalness within the organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985). In alignment with this theoretical framework, there were clear elements of central, enduring, and distinguishing attributes. Notably, the rapid changes in distance education throughout its history have played a significant role in contributing to the effectiveness of maintaining an enduring evolution over time (Allen & Seaman, 2003; Hülsmann, 2004; Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Ginder, 2014; Waks, 2013).

Research Questions

Research Question 1: What are the benefits of a distance education department that functions under an academic umbrella as perceived by former and present actors and stakeholders?

Research Question 2: How does an academically based distance education department impact other support

departments and divisions at a university?

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, specifically an ethnographic design, to explore the culture and structure of the organization. The theoretical framework that guided this exploration was Organizational Identity Theory (OIT) (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Whetten, 2006), a well-established lens for understanding how organizations perceive and present themselves. Ethnographic research was chosen for its ability to provide a unique perspective on relationships from the participant's viewpoint, facilitating data-driven discovery. The resulting theories can then be applied quantitatively to broader populations. Ethnographic research has proven its versatility in examining organizations across various disciplines, including education, business, healthcare, and more.

The researchers meticulously collected data through interviews, observation, artifacts, and documents, maintaining field notes throughout the process. These field notes served as an integral part of the audit trail (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Creswell, 2007), ensuring the transparency and traceability of the research. Furthermore, triangulation was employed to bolster accuracy, broaden the scope and depth, clarify the constructs developed during the investigation, and effectively mitigate biases (Creswell, 2007; Zaharlick, 1992).

Participants

This study used nine participants, each providing a unique perspective and a rich context. The following participant descriptions capture the general backgrounds of their professional journeys. Participants A through D were in faculty or administrative ranks. Participant "A" worked in higher education and played a pivotal role in the expansion of fully online programs for graduate college. As former Executive Vice Provost, she oversaw the Distance Education and Continuing Education for Southern University. Participant "B" is a retired university president who was instrumental in supporting the development of online education. His constant support provided the platform for the success of the distance education support department. Participant "C" was in the Distance Learning department and played a vital role in the development and first complete iteration of the distance education support department. She maintained a voice of its direction throughout her tenure. Her voice during pivotal moments of transition allowed for the distance education support department to continue to be housed under an academic umbrella. Participant "D" is a tenured professor at the university in the College of Education at Southern University and was a champion of distance education and the technology that brings the institution into the 21st century while fostering a community of learning between and among modalities.

Participants E and I held staff positions at Southern University. Participant "E" was one of the founding members of the distance education support department, bringing a business background to the team.

Participant "F' was an originating staff member of the distance education support department and holds a dual

role as an adjunct professor of graphic design and full-time staff for the distance education support department.

Participant "G" served as an originating staff member and former director of the distance education support department, bringing a wealth of experience to the study. Participant "H", also an originating staff member, held the role of systems manager, ensuring the smooth operation of the distance education support department. Participant "I", an originating staff member and instructional designer, contributed to the development of the distance education support department over a significant period.

Instrument

The primary data collection method was face-to-face video recordings or web conferencing and Zoom-recorded interviews with key stakeholders from the organization's inception. These interviews aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the significant issues identified by the participants. The pertinent issues pertaining to the support department emerged through collecting and analyzing this data, drawing on established methodologies (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Creswell, 2007; Wolcott,1994).

Data Collection

The researchers fulfilled multiple roles as interviewers, observers, and analysts in the study. They approached the interviews with an interpretive social constructivist perspective, aiming to understand the participants' perspectives. Data collection followed a thematic analysis framework involving systematic sorting and re-sorting to uncover patterns and relationships within the gathered information (Creswell, 2007; Goodall, 2000). Adopting a hermeneutic viewpoint, the researchers delved into the meanings underlying the participants' words. For instance, they would consider the context in which a statement was made, or the tone of voice used, to enrich data evaluation. Employing a constructivist-interpretive methodology, the research design aimed to explore the "how" and "what" of organizational dynamics, acknowledging the influence of behaviors, beliefs, and language within the cultural context of the group under study (Harris, 1968; Agar, 1996).

Upon completion of the protocol checklist, interviews were conducted with meticulous attention to detail. Field notes were used with two columns to separate observations during the interviews with notes that could lead to follow-up questions. After each interview, the researchers prepared a summation and selected critical elements of relevance to revise the next set of interview questions based on the former for more robust findings.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process, a rigorous and thorough journey inspired by the audit trail described by Guba and Lincoln (2005) and Saldana (2012) in qualitative data analysis, was a testament to our commitment to valid research. The initial broad categories, meticulously determined from the interview questions, provided a robust framework for the narrative-based analysis (Emerson et al., 2011). The next step of this process was reducing data into themes and categories, which we accomplished with utmost precision using Saldana's (2012) method of

analyzing and making thematic connections. Also, we inserted "thick description" detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships as observed (Geertz, 1973; Denzin, 1989; Fraenkel et al., 2014).

Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability, within the constructs of a postpositivist approach, are preferred to confirmability and dependability (Guba, 2005). Reliability is established by replicating the same instrument to different subjects more than twice and obtaining comparable results (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Confirmability, which applies objectivity that accounts for the researcher's bias or theoretical influences, is a measure of the extent to which others could confirm the findings. Dependability, on the other hand, refers to the consistency and stability of the research process and findings over time. To ensure a balance of dependability and confirmability, a critical approach was taken and reflected in the narrative. Using verbatim quotes, a detailed account of all aspects of the process and observations of the researcher were used to contribute to the dependability of the findings, while confirmability was enhanced through the application of objectivity.

Reliability, a vital aspect of the research process, was established through various means. These included familiarity with the culture provided in a biographical sketch, field notes, use of qualitative research methods to conduct an ethnography, debriefings after interview data collection, feedback from committee and peers, a reflective journal, and reviewing literature examining similar cultures. In our study, we ensured reliability by conducting debriefings at the end of each interview to confirm the accuracy of the data collected. Guba and Lincoln (2005) stress that the researcher's reliability, or their ability to consistently adhere to the research protocol and maintain objectivity, is of utmost importance and is subject to scrutiny if not in compliance. This highlights the researcher's accountability and the meticulousness of the research.

Validity was robustly ensured using triangulation, a powerful technique that significantly enhances the credibility of the results. This technique not only ensures accuracy but also broadens the scope and depth of the study, clarifies the constructs developed throughout the investigation, and effectively reduces biases (Creswell, 2007; Zaharlick, 1992; Wolcott, 1994). Triangulation is the technique of using more than one data collection method within a study to give more credibility to the results. The results are more credible if interviews and observations produce similar discoveries, instilling confidence in the validity and credibility of the findings.

Findings and Discussion

Discussion Research Question One

What are the benefits of an internal distance education department that functions under an academic umbrella as perceived by former and present actors and stakeholders within an internal distance education department?

The most significant benefit of integrating an internal distance education support department under the academic umbrella, as perceived by former and present actors and stakeholders, was the creation of a collaborative 'one stop shop'. This integration, a testament to our collective efforts, served as a method of on-the-job training to

fulfill developing needs and sustain the department. From 1990 through 1999, Berger and Mrozowskis (2001) observed that there was not a combination support department dedicated to online educational technology and teaching pedagogies. Participants' responses determined that the goal of the development of the distance education support department was, "responding to the needs of the students and the faculty" as noted by Participant A. This commitment as perceived by Participant C was, "we were not only after quantity, but we were also after quality as well." The decision to be under the umbrella of Academic Affairs was the most sensible for all parties, as reiterated by Participant A. Organizational Identity Theory (OIT) is often used by social constructivists to describe malleable organizations, such as distance education support departments which experience intrinsic periods of transition (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Whetten, 2006).

Across the board, all participants agreed that there was a crucial need to have these support departments working under the academic umbrella to ensure learner success, a key indicator of our collective impact. Institutions for Higher Education need to integrate and advance educational technologies, utilizing innovative methods in their scholarly activities to deliver quality education to their students. Additionally, distance and online education need the implementation of interactive and innovative teaching strategies, a reduction in traditional methods, and the utilization of information and communication technologies. Modern approaches such as project-based learning and problem-based learning should also be emphasized (Sendogdu, A. A., & Koyuncuoglu, 2022).

According to Organizational Identity Theory (OIT), Albert and Whetten (1985) and Whetten (2006), found these elements of central and enduring attributes. The central attribute of Organizational Identity Theory (OIT) is driven by the historic development of an organization, in this case, its foundation under the academic umbrella. The enduring attribute is relative to the shared goal of the organization and for this organization, it was academic student success. The Southern University distance education support department, as a practical application of these findings, was filling a support need for faculty and striving toward developing a combination department. Implementing a distance education department must be done as a resolution to educational issues to achieve a desired result, which serves as the evidence to support the change (Watkins et al., 2013; Eckel et al., 1999).

Findings from this study determined that decisions were made by the administration at the earliest stages of its development, and as Participant A stated, "it made sense". Previous studies that evaluated the instructor experience with technology support departments lacked pedagogical or collegiate support for instructional delivery (Lei & Gupta, 2010; Terosky & Heasely, 2015). As described by Participant I, "it's educational technology and what we do goes into pedagogy." Meyer et al., (2019) found that student retention in online programs was reliant upon academic integration. Several participants noted the benefits for faculty from all disciplines and appreciation from student population that the department be housed under academics, rather than a technology umbrella. The Southern University distance education support department is housed in the same building as the College of Education, a centralized area where various faculty professional development trainings occur. A centralized, enduring space is an attribute of OTI that supports the placement under academics. It maintains the fluctuation of educational technologies, while being pedagogically grounded, thereby enhancing the faculty's teaching capabilities and their overall contribution to the institution.

Discussion Research Question Two

How does an academically based distance education department impact other support departments and divisions at a university?

The findings for this question are closely related to research question 1 as the "one-stop shop" impacts all the departments that are alleviated from servicing the population in a truncated or disconnected manner. Ease of access is something that was found in the literature review as a primary reason students stay in online programs (Flowers & Baltzer, 2006; Grzeda & Miller, 2009). Ease of access and centralization of the physical space impacted concentrated departments of pedagogy and technology that intersected and formulated the Online Distance Education Support Department (ODSD). The ODSD was not a sudden creation but evolved over time in response to the changing needs of the university and the students. It started as a small unit within the technology department, providing technical support for online courses. However, as the demand for online courses grew, it expanded its scope to include pedagogical support and became a separate department. Ultimately, instead of going to the discipline-specific department for the development of an online course, faculty go directly to the ODSD to obtain support, and students can go directly to the ODSD for support with online discipline-specific technology issues. This prevented the instructor from being bombarded with emails, calls, or visits that would be redirected.

The coordination between the ODSD and academic affairs is not just crucial, it's a necessity to guarantee alignment with academic standards, accreditation requirements, and curriculum development. This partnership is a testament to the value we place on faculty training for online teaching and learning methodologies (Adams & Clark, 2016), ensuring that our online courses meet the same rigorous standards as our traditional ones.

Higher education institutions thrive on community and direct interaction between students and faculty, which is crucial for seeking help and support. The ODSD, with its centralized and organized approach to distance learning, as advocated by professors who emphasize the need for a shared commitment to student success (Niemi & Kousa, 2020), ensures that all stakeholders are aligned in their efforts. This is achieved through various initiatives such as online discussion forums, virtual office hours, and collaborative project spaces, which foster a sense of community and encourage direct interaction between students and faculty. This centralized support system symbolizes the ODSD's strategy, providing comprehensive support that benefits the entire university community and significantly enhances the efficiency and effectiveness of the university's support system.

The convergence of pedagogy and technology within the ODSD is not just a convergence of expertise, it's a convergence of minds and ideas. This collaborative environment, where educational and technical expertise meet, is crucial for developing high-quality online courses and resolving discipline-specific technology issues. A dedicated support department ensures that pedagogical and technological needs are addressed in an organized manner, thereby enhancing the overall quality of online education. This collaborative approach is not just a testament to the ODSD's role, it's a celebration of the innovation and teamwork it promotes across the university.

In conclusion, establishing the Online Distance Education Support Department (ODSD) as an academically based

distance education department profoundly impacts various aspects of a university's operations. The ODSD, with its unique role, catalyzes collaboration and innovation across various support departments and divisions within a university. It has paved the way for the development of more flexible and accessible educational opportunities for students through initiatives such as asynchronous learning, online tutoring, and virtual classrooms. These initiatives have not only made education more accessible to students with diverse needs and schedules but also enhanced the learning experience. Moreover, it fosters a sense of community and ensures integration of pedagogical and technological support. These collective benefits significantly enhance the university's capacity to deliver quality online education, making the ODSD a cornerstone of the university's academic landscape.

Conclusion

Findings revealed that the Distance Learning department, housed under an "academic umbrella," was a one-stop shop for both faculty and student support. This support encompassed various services, including technical support for online platforms, troubleshooting for digital tools, and instructional technology support for designing and delivering online courses. Additionally, findings revealed that housing the Distance Learning department under the "academic umbrella" provided a centralized location for support and alleviated the professor's load in supporting students with instructional technology support.

The researchers' findings throughout this process of a historic ethnographic study of a distance education support department provide a framework for other institutions within the discipline looking to develop, improve, or inspire opportunity. Examining higher education organizational constructs that support these delivery methods and the students, staff, and faculty serve as a best practice guide for all institutions entering and immersed in the educational digital age.

In summary, the enduring perspectives of the participants, spanning more than two decades from the inception of one distance education support department in one Hispanic-serving institution in South Texas, are a testament to their unwavering dedication. Their recollection of the events, which led to the department's persistent motivation to serve all learners, was powerful. They need to express that this support area was always a priority, regardless of how many name and administrative changes occurred, and this institution would stay true to its plan. Educational research applying an ethnographic lens provided an authentic voice from real actors that embarked upon a journey without prior exploration, but the surety of its need to be developed and sustained.

Recommendations

It is recommended that stakeholders recognize the potential benefits of integrating pedagogy and technology in distance education support departments. This balance can enhance our ability to provide comprehensive services to our population, fostering a more effective and engaging learning environment. Like reflective teaching practices, educational research is also reflective. It is recommended that all administrations learn how this support department became a part of the institution's strategic plan at the earliest time of perceived change. In other words, develop an initiative across the institution to conduct research contributing and aligned with the vision and mission

of the institution relative to the developments in technology. This alignment, which is deeply rooted in the institution's strategic plan, is crucial as it provides our efforts with a clear direction and purpose.

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