

# Instructional designers as potential leaders in community colleges

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*The literature suggests that there is an impending shortage of community college executive leadership (AACC, 2005; Amey & VanDerLinden, 2002; McNair, 2010; McNair, Duree, & Ebbers, 2011; Reille & Kezar, 2010; Riggs, 2009; Shults, 2001). The typical pipeline for filling these vacancies is also facing shortages (AACC, 2005; Amey & VanDerLinden, 2002; McNair, 2010; McNair, Duree, & Ebbers, 2011; Reille & Kezar, 2010; Riggs, 2009; Shults, 2001). Instructional designers are not in the typical pipeline for community college executive leadership positions. However, investigation into the education and competencies of instructional designers and community college executive leadership positions indicate that instructional designers may help to fill the shortage in community college leaders.*

The literature suggests that there is an impending shortage of community college executive leadership (AACC, 2005; Amey & VanDerLinden, 2002; McNair, 2010; McNair, Duree, & Ebbers, 2011; Reille & Kezar, 2010; Riggs, 2009; Shults, 2001). New presidents generally come up through the ranks and tend to hold one of six positions just prior to being appointed as a president of a community college (Amey & VanDerLinden, 2002). In rank order, these eight positions are: provost, president of another community college, senior academic affairs/instruction officer, other administrative position, dean/director of continuing education, faculty, community college system administrator, and public school administrator (Amey & VanDerLin-

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den, 2002). However, the literature also notes that this standard pipeline for filling presidential vacancies is in danger of shortages, too (AACC, 2005; Amey & VanDerLinden, 2002; McNair, 2010; McNair, Duree, & Ebbers, 2011; Reille & Kezar, 2010; Riggs, 2009; Shults, 2001). This fact would indicate that a new source of filling shortages in the executive leadership pipeline is needed. The rest of this article will make a case for considering instructional designers as potential leaders in community colleges.

## **Intersection of Leadership and Instructional Design**

Rothwell and Kazanas (2008) state that instructional design is “associated with the broader concept of analyzing human performance problems systematically, identifying the root causes of those problems, considering various solutions to address the root causes, and implementing the solutions in ways designed to minimize the unintended consequences of corrective action.” The instructional designer not only develops the instruction, but also may prepare job aids or redesign reporting relationships or communication methods (Rothwell & Kazanas, 2008). Richey, Fields, and Foxon (2001) state “instructional design is a generic process for analyzing human

performance problems and determining appropriate solutions to such problems” (p. 29). Instructional designers may also be called upon to visualize future problems and changes, then develop ways to prepare the organization’s employees for the changes (Richey et al., 2001). From these descriptions of instructional design, it is apparent that instructional designers embody leadership qualities.

Kotter (2008) states “leadership... is about coping with change” (p. 5). Everything around us is changing. The speed of change continues to accelerate and keeping ahead of the curve is almost impossible. Leading an organization to change begins with “developing a vision of the future along with strategies for producing the changes needed to achieve that vision” (Gallos, 2008, p. 7). Leaders must be able to bring people together to form coalitions for change (Gallos, 2008). However, “effective leadership takes experience, reflection, practice, and wisdom acquired over time and circumstance” (Gallos, 2008, p. 61). Leadership is a set of skills “and any skill can be strengthened, honed, and enhanced, given the motivation and desire, along with practice and feedback, role models, and coaching” (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 340). Eddy (2005) reports that “college presidents are constantly learning and adjusting

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their conceptions of leadership” (p. 721). It is clear that lifelong learning is a skill that leaders need to practice. It is also clear that each person brings a unique set of experiences, positive and negative, to a leadership position and these experiences shape the values, insights, and style of the leader (Eddy, 2005).

According to Amey and VanDerLinden (2002), community college administrators typically hold a master’s degree or a doctorate degree. There are exceptions, with some holding a bachelor’s or associate degree; however, college presidents and chief academic officers are the most likely to hold doctorate degrees. Only 2% of the presidents in Amey and VanDerLinden’s study held doctorate degrees in community college administration. The large majority held an education-related doctorate and about 20% held doctorate degrees in a liberal arts discipline (Amey & VanDerLinden, 2002). Eddy (2005) states “the foundation for this learning journey is the core schema of how each president processes incoming information and begins to make sense of it” (p. 721). These data imply that the actual focus of the doctorate is not important; it is the actual journey that develops the skills essential for leadership.

Instructional designers come from various backgrounds, much

as community college presidents do. In addition, many instructional designers complete master’s degrees and/or doctorate degrees in education-related areas. From the standpoint of education then, many instructional designers have educational backgrounds similar to that of many community college administrators. Instructional designers may be faculty, work with continuing education programs, or work within distance learning departments on community college campuses. Their educational background in designing for learning, the requirement for teamwork in what they do, and the communication abilities that are needed to function effectively across disciplines may add critical experience to their potential as a leader. This experience, along with focused professional development, could easily prepare an instructional designer to take an executive leadership role as an academic officer, either as the chief academic officer or as a dean or department chair.

Community college presidents have commented that professional development programs were important in their growth in their positions (McNair et al., 2011). They also recommended that technology and online courses could be utilized to overcome the problems of travel and cost (McNair et al., 2011). Irlbeck and Pucel

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(2000) define a leader in distance education as “a person in a position to provide vision and direction regarding distance education issues within his or her circle of influence” (p. 63). Instructional designers are found in such positions within businesses, universities, and colleges. Land and Bright (2004) outline the major duties of a distance learning leader. They include development of business strategy for distance learning, providing technology leadership for distance learning, and overseeing distance learning curriculum. Utilization of distance learning leaders to collaborate and provide professional development for faculty and mid-level administration would appear to be a good fit. The instructional designer has the background in learning management systems, theory, and distance learning technology that lends itself to developing this type of program. Community college presidents also indicated that the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) Competencies for Community College Leaders (2005) form a basis for professional development courses, and continuing education in the competencies is needed. This would indicate that both executive leaders and mid-level leaders need development in this area. The continued development of executive level leaders may best be provided by national associations,

with a change to providing more online delivery; the mid-level professional development may be provided by local or regional associations or consortiums.

## **Leadership Competencies**

There are six competencies for community college leaders, as published by the AACC (2005). The International Board of Standards for Training, Performance and Instruction (IBSTPI®) published four competencies for the instructional designer (2000). Though the numbers of competencies differ, they incorporate similar competencies.

## **Organizational Strategy**

The first AACC (2005) competency is organizational strategy. “An effective community college leader strategically improves the quality of the institution, protects the long-term health of the organization, promotes the success of all students, and sustains the community college mission, based on knowledge of the organization, its environment, and future trends” (AACC, 2005, p. 3). Illustrations for this competency include assessment, development, implementation, and evaluation of strategies, use of data-driven evidence for problem solving, and support for innovation and teamwork. The

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IBSTPI® (2000) competencies include (a) application of current research and theory to the practice of instructional design and (b) application of research skills to design projects under professional foundations. Under planning and analysis is competency in (a) conducting needs assessments, (b) identification of target audience, and (c) analysis of the environment (IBSTPI®, 2000). Design and development includes evaluation and assessment of instruction, and implementation and management includes planning and managing projects, collaboration, partnerships, and relationships with internal and external coworkers, along with provision of effective implementation of products and programs (IBSTPI®, 2000). IBSTPI® (2000) has broken the competencies down differently than AACC (2005); however, there is certainly a great deal of crossover in organizational strategy.

A needs assessment incorporates six processes; three of the processes are essential and three are advanced (Richey et al., 2001). Essential elements are expected to be met by all instructional designers, even at the novice level; the advanced elements are expected to be met only by experienced instructional designers (Richey et al., 2001). The processes, as outlined by Richey et al. (2001) are as follows:

- Describe the problem and its dimensions, identifying the discrepancies between current and desired performance. (Essential)
- Clarify the varying perceptions of need and their implications. (Advanced)
- Select and use appropriate needs assessment tools and techniques. (Essential)
- Determine the possible causes of the problem and potential solutions. (Essential)
- Recommend and advocate noninstructional solutions when appropriate. (Advanced)
- Complete a cost benefit analysis for recommended solutions. (Advanced)

The advanced skills require an instructional designer to determine an appropriate solution and provide recommendations to accomplish the solution (Richey et al., 2001).

## **Resource Management**

The second AACC (2005) competency is resource management. “An effective community college leader equitably and ethically sustains people, processes, and information as well as physical and financial assets to fulfill the mission, vision, and goals of the community college” (AACC, 2005, p. 3). Illustrations provided (AACC, 2005) include (a) dealing with in-

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tegrity and integration of different systems, (b) resource assessment, (c) funding sources, (d) human resources, (e) time management, (f) delegation, and (g) managing conflict. Under professional foundations, IBSTPI® (2000) includes identification and resolution of ethical and legal implications of instructional design. Implementation and management includes business skills as they relate to instructional design (IBSTPI®, 2000). In addition, leading projects and teams, delegation of duties, time management, and budgetary management are all included in the instructional design competencies under one of the four competencies. Instructional designers are expected to determine if currently owned instructional materials can be reused, or modified, for a project (Richey et al., 2001). This skill is essential and may lead into the advanced performance of using cost-benefit analysis to determine the correct course of action (Richey et al., 2001). McNair et al. (2011) discovered that gaps in knowledge of new executive leadership in community colleges exists in fundraising, finances, construction, bonding issues, grants, and local and state finances. Though instructional designers may have some experience with this skill set, few would be competent in all areas of finances. This is a common area

where professional development would be needed.

## **Communication**

Communication is the third AACC (2005) competency. “An effective community college leader uses clear listening, speaking, and writing skills to engage in honest, open dialogue at all levels of the college and its surrounding community, to promote the success of all students, and to sustain the community college mission” (AACC, 2005, p. 4). This competency deals with verbal and oral communication geared toward the particular audience, along with active listening skills (AACC, 2005). Under professional foundations, IBSTPI® (2000) competencies include the ability to communicate effectively. For the instructional designer, communication is not only oral and written, but includes visual forms as well. Richey et al. (2001) suggest that instructional designers often act in a leadership role as they communicate with clients, instructional design team members, and sponsors to discuss and clarify design projects. Instructional designers are expected to read the current literature and apply it to instructional design projects or problems as appropriate (Richey et al., 2001). Not only should instructional designers keep up with instructional design literature, but they also need

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to stay on top of cognitive science and psychology of learning literature in order to follow new data on how information is processed and assimilated (Richey et al., 2001). They may also need to read human factors and organizational psychology literature as they apply to effectively training workers in the workplace (Richey et al., 2001). Keeping up with new technologies, evaluating them, implementing them, and training others how to use them are also important for the instructional designer (Richey et al., 2001).

### **Collaboration**

Collaboration is the fourth AACC (2005) competency. “An effective community college leader develops and maintains responsive, cooperative, mutually beneficial, and ethical internal and external relationships that nurture diversity, promote the success of all students, and sustain the community college mission” (AACC, 2005, p. 4). This competency deals with internal and external relationships, teamwork, working “effectively and diplomatically with unique constituent groups such as legislators, board members, business leaders, accreditation organizations, and others” (AACC, 2005, p. 4). Under design and development, IBSTPI® (2000) requires the instructional designer to “design instruction that reflects an

understanding of the diversity of learners and groups of learners” (p. 1). Promoting “collaborations, partnerships and relationships among the participants in a design project” (IBSTPI®, 2000, p. 1) is under the competency for implementation and management. Vaughan and Weisman (1998) state “the global economy and changes in revenue have encouraged community college presidents to seek new partners from all segments of society, including business and industry, other educational institutions, health care providers, social agencies, and other state, local, and federal agencies and organizations” (p. 15). The days of working within a narrowly defined community are gone. The Internet and the capabilities of distance learning have expanded the ability of learners to choose any school they wish; they are no longer geographically limited. Students are now able to cross borders and find programs or courses from a variety of academic institutions worldwide (Vaughn & Weisman, 1998). Academic leaders must now prepare their students to work in a cross-cultural, global economy, and they must strive to provide instruction that reflects the cultural diversity of the students it serves (Vaughn & Weisman, 1998). Instructional designers also must deal with the global economy and with cultural differences among learners if students

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are to be ready to work within the 21st century global economy (Richey et al., 2001). Collaborations are no longer limited to local, regional, and state entities but now expand to national and international venues. Both the community college presidents and the instructional designers have had to move out of a small vision of collaboration into a global vision of collaboration. Experienced instructional designers should understand and identify situations where collaborations and partnerships would benefit the organization; included in this component would be the ability to identify the stakeholders who would need to be included and the level of their involvement (Richey et al., 2001).

### **Advocacy**

Community college advocacy is the fifth competency (AACC, 2005). “An effective community college leader understands, commits to, and advocates for the mission, vision, and goals of the community college” (AACC, 2005, p. 5). Though at first glance it would seem that instructional designers would not have any corollary competency, this is not strictly true. Illustrations of this competency include academic excellence, student success, learning and innovation, and advancement of lifelong learning. Instructional designers are involved in academic

excellence and student success by the nature of designing instruction that accommodates different learning styles and different cultures. Lifelong learning is inherent in instructional design since the tools to provide instruction and training are constantly changing, and instruction for faculty and students must be constantly updated to reflect those changes.

### **Professionalism**

Professionalism is the last competency (AACC, 2005). “An effective community college leader works ethically to set high standards for self and others, continuously improve self and surroundings, demonstrate accountability to and for the institution, and ensure the long-term viability of the college community” (AACC, 2005, p.5). Instructional designers are also expected to deal ethically with everyone they work with, and they are expected to create high-quality instructional solutions.

Clark and Gottfredson (2008) in their report *In Search of Learning Agility* posit that beginning in 2004, learning agility reached the 3.0 stage. At the 3.0 stage “there is no such thing as permanent competence or a fully developed skill set in either individuals or organizations” (p. 16). The Internet now offers collaborative tools online. There are open sources and open content files, file sharing is



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available, and all of these can help collaboration efforts and efforts to save time. Webinars, virtual conferencing, and learning management systems have made it possible to stay at your desk and take advantage of an endless parade of learning opportunities. The downside is that these learning opportunities can become overwhelming and can take up a tremendous amount of time if the focus of personal and organizational development is too broad. In order to lead in this age of learning agility, one must become a rapid learner (Clark & Gottfredson, 2008; Richey et al., 2001; Schein, 2008).

## **Instructional Designers and Institutional Knowledge Management**

According to Nick Bontis (1999) “scientific folklore in the early 1900s stated that all the information in the world doubled every 30 years. As the 1970s approached, that number was reduced to seven years. Prognosticators have pushed this notion further and state by the year 2010 all the information in the world will double every 11 hours” (p. 435). It is clear that information is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and 365 days a year to anyone with an Internet connection. News channels on the Internet as well as social me-

dia sites provide access to worldwide events at a moment’s notice. News can be broadcast around the world in the blink of an eye with an iPhone. This incredible circumstance makes it important that everyone with an academic institution keep up to date on the latest information in their specialty. No one person would be able to take in and process this overwhelming amount of information. Without constant diligence there is an ever increasing threat of delivering outdated information to students, losing data, and being unable to retrieve data (Clark & Gottfredson, 2008). Strong leadership is needed to bring everyone in the organization into a learning mindset. “Learning continues to shift from being discrete and event-based to becoming continuous and imbedded into workflow” (Clark & Gottfredson, 2008, p. 21). There will be no separation between work and learning. Those who do not wish to learn or who do not know how to learn will be at a distinct disadvantage in this new environment.

“Robert Kelley of Carnegie Mellon University found that in 1996 knowledge workers stored 75 percent of the knowledge they needed to do their work in their own minds. In 1997, that percentage plummeted to 15 to 20 percent. Finally, in 2006, knowledge workers reported that they only stored

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eight to 10 percent of the knowledge they need to do their jobs in their minds” (Clark & Gottfredson, 2008, p. 22). Distance learning instructional designers must be aware of the changing environment and the tools to improve informal and formal learning and content delivery. Those with master’s and doctorate degrees are poised to assume leadership roles in learning organizations. The instructional designer can assist the president with transitioning to a learning organization, and they can become integral in developing and maintaining quality in distance education and in utilization of new technologies in the classroom. Instructional designers can work with the institutional technology and institutional systems leaders to produce, collect, and retrieve the information needed to evaluate success of instructional processes. Instructional designers may also be instrumental in collaboration on a regional or statewide distance learning model that provides continuing professional development opportunities for faculty, staff, and mid- and executive-level administrators.

Land and Bright (2004) describe the Distance Learning Leader Certification Program (DLLCP). The strategy for this certification is a hybrid of face-to-face and online instruction. The pilot group identified the following

benefits of the program: “cutting-edge DL leadership skills you can use today; ability to communicate DL vision and strategy more effectively; interaction with business and higher education leaders with a wide range of perspectives and insights; and ensuring learning technology dollars are invested wisely” (p. 28). Amey and VanDerLinden (2002) report that 56% of community college presidents had mentors that guided them as they progressed through their professional lives, obtained their current position, and began their roles as presidents. Sixty percent of the presidents in this report are currently mentors to at least one person. Reille and Kezar (2010) note that though mentoring is important in the development of future leaders, it is difficult to arrange within a leadership program and tends to happen spontaneously between people who work together or have connected through networking relationships. Community college presidents reported that they were not prepared for the “overwhelming nature of the job” (Shults, 2001, p. 8). “They also reported being unprepared for the level of politics involved, fundraising, budgeting, and the amount of relationship building they were expected to accomplish” (Shults, 2001, p.9). McNair et al. (2011) recommend formal professional development programs that are based on the AACC competen-

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cies. In addition, they recommend mentoring relationships, job shadowing, and internship experiences (McNair et al., 2011). Riggs (2009) recommends yearlong internship programs, and Reille and Kezar (2010) discuss “growing your own” professional development programs. All of these recommendations are viable but will take strong administrative leadership to accomplish. Instructional designers may find their entry-level leadership duties to encompass the development of leadership professional development programs for low- to mid-level administrators or those who wish to pursue a leadership career path.

## Conclusion

It is clear that there is the potential for a shortage in executive-level leaders in community colleges in the near future. It is also clear

that those who traditionally come up through the ranks to fill these positions may also be experiencing a shortage. Comparing the educational preparation and the competencies required of community college presidents and instructional designers who are distance learning leaders seems to reflect similar skill sets. In the past, community colleges have not hired instructional designers into executive-level leadership positions. It is hoped that this article will bring to light the potential of gathering instructional designers into the pipeline for executive leadership positions within community colleges. It would seem that the need for continuing professional development would provide a perfect mid-level administrative position for an instructional designer with a distance learning background and a master’s or doctorate degree in instructional design.

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