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Interstate Distance Education Partnerships:
Case Study of Challenges and Accomplishment

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Abstract

This paper chronicles the challenges in development of a partnership to deliver specialized teacher training across state lines. The authors present a framework of needed steps and use information from their experiences in a case study format to support and explain the progression of a proposed partnership to train teachers of the visually impaired between the Training Program for Professional in Visual Impairment at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, TX, and the Arkansas School for the Blind in Little Rock, AR. The authors discuss the initial concept and need, the development commitment between the two parties, the struggles to navigate state and federal regulations, the satisfaction of requirements presented by a myriad of stakeholders, and completion of the initial stage of the partnership. Additionally, reflections on lessons learned during and after the process are offered to assist others as they move toward the establishment of their own interstate partnerships.

Interstate Distance Education Partnerships:
Case Study of Challenges and Accomplishment

The delivery of instruction from a program in one state to students in another state involves more than the identification of an instructional need and the recruitment of students. While recruiting and need are essential for success, the necessity to comply with federal regulations, in particular 34 CFR § 600.9 (US Department Of Education, 2010a), and the various entity requirements in each state regarding the delivery of distance education may risk stalling implementation of program delivery and/or could seem an insurmountable challenge that would doom such a project.

The process of gaining permission to deliver instruction to another state can require the approval and support of various university officials and departments, the coordination of technological capabilities between sites, the permission and approval of higher education coordination boards in both states, and the approval of instructional content by national, regional, or state educational agencies. All of this must be accomplished while meeting the standards of delivering stimulating high quality content, in a reliable format, in a cost efficient manner, and in a supportive, interactive environment (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2000).

This paper will offer lessons that were learned in this implementation process, detail how these issues were handled in this case, and identify suggestions that may help others seeking to provide interstate program delivery. Specifically, this paper will chronicle the effort to establish interstate delivery of highly specialized teacher certification training in the field of visual impairment from Stephen F. Austin State University (SFASU) to teachers in Arkansas who are working at the Arkansas School for the Blind (ASBVI).

Background of Academic Entities

Stephen F. Austin State University (SFASU) is a comprehensive, regional university located in Nacogdoches, Texas. The university sustains an enrollment of approximately 13,000 students, who choose from a wide variety of majors. Class sizes are small, averaging 26 students. SFASU students are encouraged to engage in applied learning activities such as internships and research opportunities. More specifically, the university's Department of Human Services administers teacher certification training in the field of visual impairment. The Office of Instructional Technology provides support and solutions for instructional endeavors involving technology, for both face-to-face and distance education modalities.

The Arkansas School for the Blind & Visually Impaired (ASBVI) offers quality educational programs and resources to students who are blind or visually impaired, aged birth through twenty-one, across the state of Arkansas. The residential school was founded in 1859, and the facility currently houses 83 students. ASBVI serves other students with visual impairments across the state through a birth to age 3 program, summer camps, and statewide outreach and support designed to help meet the needs of students with visual impairments across Arkansas.

Identifying a Need and Potential Benefits

One of the first steps that must be taken prior to the development of a program to deliver instruction across state lines is the establishment of need for training in the target state. Additionally, both the delivering and receiving entities must receive some sort of benefit if this endeavor is going to take place and be sustained. In our case, the training partnership to deliver instruction to Arkansas teachers was the result of a simple phone call initiated by staff at ASBVI. The idea of a partnership to train teachers of students with visual impairments was the result of a

conversation between the Special Education Director, Teresa Doan, at ASBVI, and Orientation and Mobility (O&M) Program faculty, Barry Stafford, at SFASU. The SFASU O&M program had previously placed students at ASBVI to facilitate completion of their internship requirement to become Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialists. During the conversation, Mrs. Doan expressed the need to locate and develop a new training program to help prepare teachers of visually impaired students to fill positions at ASBVI. Mr. Stafford passed the information along to Michael Munro, faculty member in the Visual Impairment Teacher Program.

The training program at SFASU has had some experience in delivering instruction to other states. As far back as 2002, the vision program delivered on-site and distance education training to students in Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming. The program used some support and systems of the Northeast Texas Consortium (NETnet). This consortium is a collaborative of higher education institutions that has as its focus the provision of educational technology and instructional services to rural populations primarily in Texas (Northeast Texas Consortium, 2012). Much has changed over that 10-year period in regard to technology and regulations. The past experience proved the willingness of the faculty to take on such a task, but did not provide much in the way of methodology or in the navigation of regulations that are currently in place.

SFASU staff research, including receipt of information from discussions with ASBVI administrators, revealed several important facts that were deemed to be promising and helped clarify the need for the training program. First, there was and is currently not an educational program offered in the state of Arkansas that provides training for teachers to become qualified as Teachers of Visually Impaired Students. Secondly, there was and is an identified need for highly qualified teachers trained in visual impairment, both at ASBVI and across Arkansas. The Arkansas Department of Education (ADE), pursuant to Arkansas Department of Education laws

A.C.A. § 6-81-609 and Act 605 of 2009, had designated the licensure area of visually impaired as a critical academic teacher licensure/endorsement shortage area for the 2010-2011 and the 2011-2012 school years (ADE Sharepoint, 2011). Finally, teachers in Arkansas, with the approval of the ADE, had been receiving training from a mid-Western out-of-state program, but the cost, necessary courses, and other requirements placed on the students had all increased while the content delivered, supervision, and instructor support was perceived to have declined. Staff at ASBVI reported that it was often necessary to “re-teach” courses so that teacher/candidates were provided the skills and training they needed. ASBVI staff explored a relationship with another out-of-state university, but that program, like the mid-Western university program, was found to be very costly, and required the teachers/candidates to obtain certification in a state outside of Arkansas as part of their training program. Frustration with the nature and quality of both programs led ASBVI administrators to seek out new arrangements and partnerships to meet the need for training teachers in visual impairment.

Addressing Concerns of the Delivering Entity

For such an endeavor to be effective, both parties need to demonstrate commitment and also receive some benefit. In this case, both the concerns of the university and of the Visual Impairment Program would need to be addressed. In an attempt to respond to the request from ASBVI, the vision program at SFASU had to determine the feasibility and impact of instructional delivery to students in Arkansas. Identified issues included administrative support (including university and interstate course delivery requirements), technological capacity, the instructional delivery method, benefit to the program at SFASU, costs to deliver the program, impact on teacher load, and support of the proposed project within the Visual Impairment Program, the Department of Human Services, and the College of Education.

Administrative Support

To garner support for such a project, administration and program faculty may need enumeration of some sort of value from the proposed action to secure their endorsement. The SFASU vision program faculty and department chair Dr. Robbie Steward expressed full support of the proposed project, and certain valuable benefits to the program were identified. Teachers in Texas currently have their training in visual impairment funded by a limited amount of grant monies. Even though applications for the program have increased, rising tuition and costs have reduced the number of grant-funded candidates that are accepted into the program. By adding students from Arkansas, the Visual Impairment Program would effectively increase the number of teachers trained. This increase in number of students trained benefits the program by showing recruitment efforts and increasing productivity.

Visual impairment faculty Dr. Dixie Mercer, Program Director; Mr. Munro, Vision Program Instructor; and Mr. Stafford, Orientation and Mobility Program Director; traveled to the ASBVI campus in Little Rock to meet school administrators Ken Hill, Superintendent; Sharon Berry, Elementary Principal; Ken Fowler, High School Principal; and Teresa Doan, Special Education Supervisor. SFASU faculty presented information regarding the Visual Impairment Program, required courses, teaching philosophy, and their commitment to training highly qualified teachers to serve students, in Texas and in Arkansas, who are blind or visually impaired. All parties left the meeting with a feeling of hope, mutual respect, and commitment to the endeavor.

Upon return to SFASU by the vision impairment faculty, a meeting was scheduled with Dr. Randy McDonald, Director of the Office of Instructional Technology; Janet Kamps, Distance Education Coordinator; Mr. Munro, Mr. Stafford, and Mr. Randy Watson, Videoconferencing

and Multimedia Specialist with the SFASU Office of Instructional Technology (OIT). The purpose of this meeting was to garner support from the OIT departmental leadership, to investigate requirements of instructional delivery to an out-of-state location, and to review university policy regarding off-site delivery of instruction—especially SFASU Out-of-State Course Delivery Policy, A-36 (SFASU, 2010). Full support from the OIT department was secured. Regarding the distance education perspective, Director McDonald approved the development of the partnership between the SFASU Visual Impairment Program and ASBVI. Director McDonald would investigate state level coordination and notification requirements for interstate delivery of instruction, with special attention paid to the implementation of new federal regulations associated with program integrity issues and institutional eligibility under the Higher Education Act (US Department of Education, 2010b).

Since the instruction to students in Arkansas would be provided concurrently via videoconference as instruction is provided to students across Texas, there would be no additional cost to SFASU for the salaries of instructors. The program would establish a separate course section for instruction in Arkansas, following established mandates of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. The section would be available for cross-referencing if it fell below the current SFASU minimum of five graduate students. By adding an Arkansas cohort, the Visual Impairment Program would increase enrollment, increase the number of students trained, and increase university-measured output.

In response to statewide budget cuts, administrators at SFASU continually seek ways to increase program, department, and college output. The proposed training project in Arkansas would help increase both enrollment and output. Reports of the proposed project and the

collaboration between the Visual Impairment Program and ASBVI were shared with Dr. Robbie Steward, Department Chair of the Human Services Department at SFASU. Dr. Steward praised the faculty for their progress, and encouraged the program faculty to continue developing the project. Dr. Steward was provided information throughout the process, and has shared progress updates with the Dean of the College of Education. SFASU and the Visual Impairment Program approved up to 12 hours of transfer credit for courses taken from other approved programs toward certification and licensure as a Teacher of Visually Impaired Students.

With the basic needs of both entities being met, both SFASU and ASBVI administration proposed full support of the project to train teachers of visually impaired students at ASBVI and across Arkansas. ASBVI personnel were actively involved, and took on multiple duties to facilitate successful implementation of the project. These duties included providing information to special education cooperatives across the state about the training program, and supporting teacher candidates in the program by identifying mentors, facilitating classes, sharing needs data, and collaborating in the development of a response to an associated Federal grant request for proposal (RFP). Mrs. Doan, the Special Education Supervisor at ASBVI, worked with SFASU's Visual Impairment Program faculty to help develop course content that was tailored to Arkansas education law, rules, and procedures; she even offered to work as an adjunct professor for SFASU. With such a strongly identified need, strong cooperation, and all-level support, everything seemed positive.

Program Delivery Standards

Regardless of the content to be delivered, programs need to make sure that the instruction provided meets their established standards. One focus of the SFASU faculty was a desire to maintain established high standards and meet best practices in content and delivery. During the

visit to ASBVI by the SFASU vision impairment faculty, part of the discussion addressed how the proposed program would need to be delivered to maintain these standards. From the beginning of efforts to bring this project to fruition, best practices of distance education were followed to help ensure a quality program for students. These elements of quality can be found in the publications of organizations such as the Quality Matters Program (Quality Matters Program, 2010), and the Sloan Consortium (The Sloan Consortium, 2012). Following best practices allowed for quality and efficiency in delivering the program, which in turn allowed more time and effort to be applied to other tasks.

The faculty of the Visual Impairment Program delivers instruction each semester to an average of six different sites across Texas, with all instruction delivered via a hybrid format. The program has over 12 years experience using hybrid delivery, and is dedicated to this form of delivery. The faculty supports the assertion of Lim, Morris, & Kupritz (2006) regarding hybrid instruction in that, “By bringing together in-class meetings and activities with the flexibility of online learning, the hybrid model addresses many of the concerns that arise in comparisons of face-to-face and fully online classes” (p. 27). Primary instruction for endorsement as a teacher of students with visual impairments is delivered through interactive television videoconferencing (ITV), and is supported on-line by teacher developed and maintained web sites. Instruction at the Master’s level is provided through the use of on-line conferencing (voice and presentation over Internet). The current delivery platform is called Blackboard Collaborate. Faculty members are SFASU Certified Online Instructors and/or are approved to teach online courses.

During meetings with the staff, commitment to hybrid delivery was reaffirmed and determined necessary if the program was going to be successful training teachers in Arkansas. The vision faculty again affirmed the beliefs presented by researchers that hybrid delivery

combines the best of both online and face-to-face instruction (Graham, 2005; Martyn, 2003). The faculty of the Visual Impairment Program expressed the preference to continue using ITV as the main delivery system for instruction if delivery to ASBVI could be executed and supported. SFASU faculty sought to determine whether instruction could be delivered to students in Texas and Arkansas concurrently to avoid having to re-teach students in the Arkansas project. Faculty discussed the possibility of moving all instruction to the Blackboard Collaborate internet platform. This option was endorsed, but considered as a back-up in case technology infrastructure and coordination of technology systems could not be secured to deliver content via ITV. Staff determined that the ideal situation would be to train the cohort in Arkansas at the same time as the Texas cohort—to deliver instruction concurrently to all sites, thereby eliminating the need to reformat delivery, re-teach content, and/or break the established instructional sequence of courses.

Technical Capacity and Support

As is generally the case with any academic program offering, it was deemed essential have the technical capacity to effectively deliver material, and to provide technical support to meet the student's needs. In our case, this step involved the evaluation of the technology capacity and support capabilities of SFASU and ASBVI. The SFASU Visual Impairment Program uses the Texas Education Telecommunication Network (TETN) to deliver ITV instruction to various Educational Service Center (ESC) sites across Texas. It was unclear whether ASBVI (and other sites in Arkansas) could connect to this Texas-based network, and if ASBVI had the infrastructure to send and receive videoconference data. If such a connection were found to be possible, the Visual Impairment Program would have to investigate and assess the costs of such a connection.

SFASU Visual Impairment Program staff again contacted Randy Watson, Videoconferencing Specialist with the SFASU Office of Instructional Technology (OIT) to determine the minimum required infrastructure that would be needed at ASBVI in order to receive videoconferenced course delivery. The Technology Director for ASBVI was contacted to investigate the system capacity at the school in Arkansas. Both systems were found to be compatible.

During the site visit, SFASU faculty also met with William Harrison, Technology Director at ASBVI, and took part in a test ITV broadcast arranged between the sites. The connection originated from the Distance Education Classroom in the Human Services Building on the SFASU campus, and was linked into the TETN hub in Houston, TX. Mr. Harrison then connected ASBVI's Distance Learning Lab into the TETN-controlled broadcast. Voice, video, computer presentation (screen shot and PowerPoint), and document camera (ELMO) presentations were all successfully broadcast. Just prior to the test broadcast, it was determined that ASBVI and other sites in Arkansas could "dial into" the TETN network, and SFASU could provide instruction to sites in Arkansas concurrently as it delivers instruction to ESC sites in Texas. It was also determined that this access to the existing network and the broadcasts could be provided without additional cost to the Visual Impairment Program of SFASU or the students in Arkansas.

Legal Requirements and Accreditation

The authors found that challenges surrounding issues of accreditation, program integrity, and permission can significantly threaten the viability of an interstate distance education project. Meeting these requirements is essential for the success of any proposal of this type. In spite of a promising beginning, these challenges also menaced the proposed program to deliver visual

impairment training to teachers in Arkansas. The struggle to gain the required permission from the various education-related entities and administrations needed to deliver content across state lines seemed almost insurmountable. As some hurdles were being cleared, others would appear adding new requirements. Frequently, progress hinged on promised action or follow through by others, often resulting in long delays waiting on promised task completion prior to being able to move forward toward program realization.

The first hurdle was on the university level, and dealt with data reporting for university accreditation. A meeting was held with Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, Dr. Mary Nell Brunson; Dr. Judy Abbott, Dean of the College of Education; OIT staff; and Vision Program staff to discuss data collection and legal requirements. Vision Program staff presented a prospectus outlining the proposed program. On the issue of data reporting for accreditation review, it was determined that since the courses were to be offered concurrently with other instruction, and that there was no physical SFASU presence in Arkansas, separate tracking for university accreditation was not needed.

Also at that meeting, OIT staff described the legal issues and proposed fees surrounding the process of gaining approval for interstate program delivery into Arkansas. Federal regulations concerning state authorization required that institutions offering educational programs via a distance modality to another state had to meet that state's requirements for providing instruction to residents living inside the state's borders (US DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION 34 CFR 690c, 2010). Although there were many details in these regulations, the most pertinent regulations in our case required SFASU to abide by any state regulations concerning distance education or face a federal punitive measure of the withholding of federal funds. Abiding by state regulation is still required, even though Federal law 34 C.F.R. § 600.9

has since been vacated (Career College Association D/B/A Association Of Private Sector Colleges And Universities, Plaintiff, V, Arne Duncan, Secretary, U.S. Department Of Education, et al., 2011). Regardless of the status of federal regulations, institutions are still required to meet the standards and comply with the laws of the states in which they operate.

One of the legal issues at the state level surrounding instruction to Arkansas residents involved “physical presence.” The matter of physical presence was important, as Arkansas regulation indicates that “physical presence” is triggered “when an institution offers courses/degree programs at a physical campus in Arkansas and/or advertising distance delivery/online programs by direct mail and/or advertising to Arkansas citizens, and targeted emails and U.S. postal mail to specific occupations.” (Arkansas Department of Higher Education, n.d.) Although instruction would be sent electronically to a physical location in Arkansas, no faculty would be physically present to give instruction, and there would be no direct marketing to Arkansas residents to advertise the program.

Further requirements presented by the Arkansas Department of Higher Education (ADHE) involved fees of \$250 to notify the state of intent, \$500 Certification fee per degree offered, travel and other expenses of the review team, and surety bond of \$20,000 (Arkansas Department of Higher Education, 2011). If these costs were to be levied, they would far outweigh the benefits to SFASU and the Vision Program. If there proved no way around these requirements, the proposed program would be scrapped before it began. Dr. Brunson stated she would consult university Legal Counsel, Damon Derrick. However, all parties left that meeting with the knowledge that if those fees were demanded, all university support of the partnership would be pulled. Progress was stalled at this point and all parties were asked to wait to hear back from Legal Counsel.

Coordination of Entities

Another major challenge involved in the development of an interstate instructional delivery project is the necessity to meet and coordinate the myriad of requirements presented by various entities and agencies in both the delivering and receiving state/states. In some cases the challenge is not only meeting the requirements, it is also getting the involved stakeholders and regulators to communicate with each other. In our project, the coordination of entities provided a significant impediment, and often slowed the process drastically or stopped it completely. During one of these stoppages, Visual Impairment faculty member Mr. Munro began contacting the different agencies, stakeholders, and offices associated with the Arkansas project to investigate any way possible to gain approval from Arkansas officials without having to pay the support-threatening fees. At this point, all the momentum of the project had been exhausted, and delays alone threatened the viability of the project. Mr. Munro talked almost daily with OIT Coordinator Kamps who was seeking feedback from University administration. Finally, contrary to protocol and established hierarchy, Mr. Munro directly contacted Zanette Douglas, Coordinator of Institutional Certification for the Arkansas Higher Education Coordinating Board (AHECB). AHECB is the agency granted the authority to establish out-of-state certification criteria and to provide oversight of the process and the out-of-state institutions (Arkansas Department of Higher Education, 2005). After patiently answering questions about the certification application process, forms, and the myriad of fees, Coordinator Douglas asked whether SFASU had been listed by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) on the Electronic Campus (EC). SREB is an organization that works with sixteen states supporting the goal of improving education for pre-kindergarten through grade 12, as well as higher education (Southern Regional Education Board, 2012). As part of the organization's outreach, SREB hosts

the Electronic Campus website, on which institutions may list their programs if those programs meet the quality standards held by SREB (Electronic Campus, 2012).

As the conversation between Mr. Munro and Coordinator Douglas continued, she explained that if SFASU was listed, and if the vision program were to become listed, such a listing would satisfy the certification requirements of the AHECB. All fees and bond requirements would be deemed unnecessary. Arkansas, like many other SREB states, uses the EC to ensure that institutions meet both accreditation standards and the requirements of quality program delivery (SREB's Electronic Campus, n.d.).

The news of this possible solution was immediately shared with the OIT coordinator at SFASU. There was once again life in the project, and it seemed as though it might come to fruition. It was confirmed that SFASU was indeed listed on the EC, but getting the vision program listed presented new challenges. Even though the Visual Impairment Program at SFASU is nationally recognized by the National Council for Accreditation for Teacher Education (NCATE, 2012), getting listed on the EC required coordination of a whole new set of entities. Coordinator Kamps and the OIT staff worked extensively to navigate the requirements of the SREB and the AHECB. The OIT staff also worked to verify program approval with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, and to secure approval from the Electronic Campus Manager assigned to assist SFASU as well as from university administration to ensure that all requirements were met and permissions were granted for the EC listing. The completion of this detailed task was further delayed when the EC site was temporarily out of service for weeks just before the Vision Program was listed. Time was short, as the first semester of students from Arkansas were planning on beginning classes in the next few weeks.

Unique Challenges of Coordinating State Support for Student Funding

The development of new projects sometimes hinges on meeting unique challenges. A key component in the development of any project is meeting the needs of the target population. To successfully recruit students for the Arkansas cohort, student costs for the SFASU program would have to meet the requirements for the tuition reimbursement program administered by the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE). Just when it seemed that all impediments had been removed, this additional stakeholder presented some challenges to program initiation. The Visual Impairment Program needed to coordinate with Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) Office of Professional Licensure on some key issues. Teachers in Arkansas are provided tuition reimbursement for training that addresses identified teaching shortage areas. As mentioned previously, Visual Impairment is one of those shortage areas. Allowing teachers in the Arkansas program to receive reimbursement was an essential component of this initiative. Administrators at ASBVI immediately contacted the Office of Professional Licensure at ADE to begin the process of gaining approval for reimbursement.

Even though SFASU is an NCATE Accredited Institution, and the Visual Impairment Program is identified as a Nationally Recognized NCATE Program, and the training provided follows the Council for Exceptional Children's national standards for instruction in visual impairment, there were still delays. While the program at SFASU had met the requirements for an out-of-state university that provides training for licensure, the delay in posting on the EC further slowed acceptance. Communication of the approval status of the program from the AHECB to the Arkansas Department of Education was either not conveyed or not accepted until the posting on the EC was completed. SFASU OIT staff diligently navigated the problem areas and gently pushed for communication and resolution. At this point, out of frustration, ASBVI administrators promised "to take this to the Governor" if there was any further resistance in

approval. Finally, the EC database was restored, the program was officially listed, and the path was clear for Arkansas students to receive reimbursement.

Now that teachers could be reimbursed, there was the question of whether the reimbursement limits covered tuition and fees at SFASU. Teachers in Arkansas are reimbursed at tuition rates based on costs of attending Arkansas universities. Arkansas teachers who enter the program at SFASU are eligible for reduced out-of-state tuition rates based on students' eligibility as student residents of a border state. Border state students are defined as non-resident students from the states of Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico and Oklahoma (SFASU, 2012). The out-of-state border state rate for tuition was found to be comparable to the tuition rates at state-supported universities in Arkansas, and less than the tuition from previous out-of-state entities which offered training. Reimbursement of tuition was felt to be a key tool in both recruiting and retaining teacher candidates for the program. Students would increase enrollment in the SFASU program as self-pay students, would have the cost of the program returned to them upon completion, and in the process, would help alleviate a teaching shortage area.

Successful Deployment

With technical, administrative, coordination, and legal difficulties successfully resolved, the program was clear to begin. Six months after the first phone call from an administrator at the Arkansas School for the Blind, teacher/candidates in Arkansas entered the program at SFASU and began their training to become teachers of students with visual impairments.

Discussion and Lessons Learned

Throughout this document, the authors have highlighted many areas of concern that may need to be addressed and/or overcome if others wish to attempt to forge an interstate distance education partnership. In an effort to distill meaningful points to assist others in their pursuit, this

discussion will highlight some of these identified areas. General areas include identifying need, addressing delivery concerns—including meeting and maintaining standards, garnering support from administrators, legal issues, and coordination of entities. Additional tips based on a reflective look at the program operation are also offered.

Establishment of Mutual Need and Benefit

If a program to deliver instruction across state lines is going to successfully developed, implemented, and sustained, the involved entities must be able to establish need for training in the target state and identify benefits for the delivering agent and the receiving entities or individuals. The level of value placed on these needs and benefits will help build support, attract students, and develop commitment. The needs and benefits of all stakeholders should be addressed in the development of the project. In our project, the authors sought to address the needs of Arkansas students who would be entering the program, their future employer—ASBVI, an agency providing financial remuneration—ADE, higher education boards in both states, administrators at the university as well as the school for the blind, and the program faculty. Some of the faculty issues, specifically those involving quality delivery and program standards, were discussed and detailed earlier. Once the need and identified benefits to stakeholders have been established, one still must be able determine the ability to effectively deliver the instructional product to the out-of-state site.

Technical Capacity and Backup

In spite of improvements in and increased availability of products and services that can assist in the delivery of distance education, new program developers must assess, address, and plan for the use of technology. This planning must address faculty experience and training, capacity of the delivering agent, capacity of the receiving agent, the ability of the entities to

establish a workable connection, availability and capability of support personnel, and the technological comfort and experience of the students involved. Problems should be expected, and alternative plans should be prepared and made readily available.

Prior to the implementation of the program, test connections were successfully completed that proved the ongoing viability of videoconference to deliver instruction. Given that the connection from ASBVI was carried over commodity lines, however, it was deemed appropriate to have a strong backup method of providing instruction to the students in both the short and long term. To limit the impact of short term problems (i.e., weather related interruptions of broadcasts or hardware failure), the ITV classes were recorded and made immediately available to sites where interruptions occurred, or to individuals who were unable to attend classes. If long-term problems existed, Blackboard Collaborate was selected to serve in a backup capacity, and this modality will eventually be implemented in the fall of 2012. In retrospect, beginning the program with both modalities in use may have allowed for transition to a web conferencing application that was already familiar to both students and faculty. For further implementation of the TVI program across additional sites in Arkansas, it is possible that Blackboard Collaborate may better serve the program and become the primary means of instruction.

Administrative and State Support

Regardless of the identified needs/benefits and the technological capacity available, the establishment of such a project requires the development of support and the attainment of approval from various individuals, leaders, administrators, offices, agencies, and entities. Each level of support that is sought may add requirements of additional approvals from individuals or agencies that were not originally anticipated. For this reason, it is important to ask questions and seek assistance along the way.

Administratively, staff and officers of both SFASU and ASBVI were known or easily identifiable to the authors. However, numerous phone calls from both of the authors were needed to identify those state officials in Texas and Arkansas who needed to be informed of the intended implementation of the program, and to learn by whom approval for implementation would be granted. In the few months before the anticipated start date of the program, only basic information was available to the authors on the Internet. It was only through diligence and questioning to learn about the process that essential answers were discovered. Knowledge created through this experience and the somewhat improved availability of information on state requirements, departmental structure, and related contact information (in Arkansas and other states) may make future endeavors more easily managed. Even with this knowledge and information, new program developers may still face challenges in agency and entity coordination.

Coordination of Entities

The significant challenges of working with the myriad of stakeholders that are involved in the establishment of a new interstate training program are multileveled. Program developers must provide these entities with all the information they require in a format and on a timeline that they establish. Frequently, responses or actions by these entities are delayed or non-existent. Unfortunately, for an individual or program that is seeking to establish the delivery of a program to a new state, these delays may stop all progress towards the goal and/or jeopardize the program altogether. An additional challenge relates to frequent need for contacted agencies to communicate with each other on behalf of the proposed project. Experience in this project reaffirmed to the authors that agencies within the same state may not have open lines of communication.

The authors worked together to ensure that each of the relevant offices and departments at SFASU were provided with all the information and paperwork needed, and that proper internal authorizations were secured. Being over-prepared with documentation for meetings, being prepared to speak on the detailed benefits and costs, bringing previously gained support, and asking direct questions seemed to assist in surviving the most high-stakes gatherings.

Concerning interstate regulations, daily or weekly interactions with Arkansas state officials or their staff members was required in order to ensure proper protocol was followed and that those who needed to stay informed of the progress of the project received the necessary information. As a result of keeping lines of communication open with Arkansas education officials, the first classes began in the fall on time and with the approval of the State of Arkansas. Obtaining approval of the program for delivery in Arkansas by state officials involved listing the program on the Electronic Campus of the Southern Regional Education Board. Given unexpected difficulties experienced by the Board with their educational program database, routine inquiries to the SREB point of contact elicited updates that were in turn communicated to the Arkansas Department of Higher Education. During this process, the authors were grateful to learn that state of Arkansas officials were understanding and willing to work with SFASU regarding the delay in getting the program listed on the SREB Electronic Campus.

An additional level of coordination was required as the program sought to accommodate the requirements of Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) to secure financial support to the Arkansas students. ADE established a program to provide tuition reimbursement to teachers who sought training in shortage areas. A significant amount of coordination effort was put forth to communicate with ADE and to facilitate communication between ADE and Arkansas Higher Education. Even after the listing on the SREB Electronic Campus, officials at ADE still required

a formal letter detailing the accreditation of SFASU and the Visual Impairment Program before the students could get final approval for reimbursement.

Arrangements were also made with the university to ensure that the students qualified for, and were charged, reduced tuition costs associated with being a “border-state” student. This was vital due to the fact that ADE would only reimburse at a rate comparable with in-state tuition at an Arkansas state university. It was only through each of these efforts that the initiative was able to meet the requirements of the various agencies in Arkansas.

As this project evolved from a “grassroots effort,” only some of the necessary tasks were known to any particular stakeholder. Throughout the endeavor, coordination of entities involved necessitated communication, not only to learn information about requirements but also to keep all members of the endeavor updated and knowledgeable about project status and task completion.

Legal Requirements

One of the most prominent areas that will need to be focused upon involves meeting legal requirements for delivery of instruction across state lines. Information about these requirements may not be easily identified or clearly defined, especially as delivery is expanded to different states or regions. The role of federal regulation is currently in a state of transition and may be significantly impacted by the results of upcoming congressional and presidential elections. Regardless of the mandates that are or are not established, the seemingly constant revision to standards from legal decisions or legislative rule-making will continue to make identifying and meeting requirements somewhat difficult. The sometimes vast differences between the regulations and requirements of the individual states only help to complicate these issues.

The authors and their respective departments had an operational awareness of the general legal requirements for procedures within the state of Texas. In setting up the administrative infrastructure of the Arkansas training program, it became evident that a detailed knowledge was needed of Arkansas regulations governing the provision of instruction across state lines to Arkansas residents. After reading through the details of numerous regulations and listings of regulatory fees, a phone call to Zanette Douglas of the Arkansas Department of Higher Education resulted in the program being approved on the principle of reciprocity through the Southern Regional Education Board. This possibility of approval by reciprocity was not found online at the time, and the authors did not know of it until so informed by the ADHE. Although general background knowledge of regulations for giving instruction to other states provides a solid foundation from which to proceed, a savings of time and effort could have been realized with preliminary interaction with the Arkansas Department of Higher Education. Others seeking to deliver content to areas that do or do not share geographic boundaries may still benefit from finding similar persons or agencies with specialized knowledge or expertise.

Additional Lessons Learned in Retrospect

As the authors reviewed the process and experience of developing an interstate distance education partnership to deliver instruction to another state, two additional lessons were discovered that helped establish and help support the interstate cohort of students. These two lessons were not thought out in advance, but may be considered by others as they attempt to establish their own interstate partnerships. The two lessons were: the necessity of designating one faculty member to address issues for the out-of-state students, and the need for several champions who strongly believe in the project and who can fight to ensure the proposed partnership becomes a reality.

Access to Designated Faculty for Students

The experience of the first year of delivery has shown that the learning experience of an out-of-state student is occasionally different from that of an in-state student, even if that person in the home state is also receiving distance education instruction. To better meet the needs of the newly developed cohort, students in Arkansas were given one point of contact for all programmatic questions and issues. This mechanism proved viable and preferred, as it made communication efforts more efficient while avoiding communication gaps and confusion of information. Several needs that were specifically related to the students in the Arkansas program were more easily addressed by this contact person rather than by each individual instructor. The students in Arkansas report that while they feel they can go to each of the program instructors for specific questions, having an identified faculty member who knows their situation helps during times of crisis. Through this process, the identified faculty member essentially takes ownership of the out-of-state student and delivery project. This concept directly supports the next lesson learned; the need to identify champions to help fight to get partnership programs started.

Champions

In this project, it became apparent that there were champions at various levels, who displayed different types of expertise and influence. In hindsight, champions were identified at three different levels including: ASBVI administrator, Director Doan; SFASU Instructional Technology leadership and staff, Distance Education Coordinator Kamps; and Visual Impairment Program junior faculty, Instructor Munro. The combined expertise, knowledge, connections, and drive of these individuals helped identify necessary steps, contacts, and requirements necessary; and assisted, when able, to gain the support or help of the identified contacts. At any point where there was a delay or a threat to the development of the program, it

seemed as though one or all of the champions would act to try to find solutions, clear hurdles, or gain necessary support. Each of these individuals was needed to push for progress in bringing the project to the point of deployment. As was proven in this case, not all programs need to be driven by upper management. This initiative seemed to operate outside of the established hierarchy and traditional path of project development. At whatever level developers can find a champion, his or her commitment and belief in the proposed program can often help carry or push the concept forward in times of stagnation or threat. Given this experience, it is likely that identifying a champion of the project at different levels will enhance the potential for future successful deployment of other interstate programs.

Future Steps

The establishment of this training partnership has been beneficial to SFASU, the SFASU Training Program for Professionals in Visual Impairment, ASBVI, the Arkansas teacher/candidates, and most importantly to students in Arkansas who are visually impaired. The future appears bright for the project, as both ASBVI and SFASU staff have expressed the desire to develop an ongoing partnership between the two entities. Administrators at ASBVI also have pledged to facilitate the expansion of the training project across Arkansas and to act as a hub for delivery and support to additional Arkansas teacher candidates in the future. Often, this project seemed as though it would be stopped by regulatory demands, red tape, and/or interoffice and interagency communication difficulties. A major challenge faced by this project was the uncertainty of how new federal regulations would be applied, and the impact these regulations would have on interstate course delivery. Regardless of the future direction of new federal regulations, state agencies appear to be highly focused on ensuring that the instruction provided in their states is of quality, and is provided by an accredited university.

As the experiences chronicled in this study can serve to enhance the efficiency of future project expansion, it is hoped that the details of this case may provide some benefit to other programs seeking to deliver instruction to students across state borders.

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