

A National Study of Online Learning Leaders in U.S. Community Colleges

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Abstract

Online learning has become a major endeavor in U.S. higher education. A 2016 national study of leadership for online learning explored a new leadership role that presidents and provosts at U.S. universities have established to coordinate and direct their efforts in this vital area. A significant portion of online education is offered by two-year schools, however. This systematic national study of online learning leaders at our community colleges, which reached out to 752 individuals and received 226 responses, will complement the first study and contribute to our understanding of this vital academic initiative in those institutions.

Keywords: online learning, leadership, higher education, academic transformation, community colleges

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Our first study of online learning leadership in U.S. universities was driven by the growing importance of the field and our lack of data about those individuals who are on point to guide initiatives and strategy. A prerequisite for that study was the monumental task of identifying the individuals currently filling the position since no list exists. That initial research shed light on this role, the professional experience of those leaders, and the organizational context in which they work. While the initial study was groundbreaking, it was only a beginning.

It is important to recognize that a significant amount of online education is offered in a sector of American higher education not included in the first study. To continue to develop a comprehensive understanding of leadership for online learning, it is necessary to consider the substantial efforts by our community colleges. Even though there has been a 14% decline in total enrollments in public two-year schools since 2012, the 5.8 million students enrolled at community colleges in 2016 represents 29% of U.S. higher education (Allen, Seaman, & Allen, 2018). Of the approximately 6.3 million students who are taking at least one online course, 30% are enrolled at two-year institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

Similar to the first study, there is also a lack of research about online learning leaders at two-year institutions. A contributing factor to this deficiency is that a list of these leaders did not previously exist. Therefore, it was necessary to begin with a systematic review of the websites of 1,024 institutions. A variety of methods for this endeavor were employed and included a review of organizational charts, utilization of numerous search terms related to the field, and access to faculty and staff directories, to name a few. This effort enabled the identification of online learning leaders at community colleges and the collection of contact information in order to create a data set. Like the first study, this one included a “safety net” communication in the survey invitation that requested that the individual identified respond with the name of a more appropriate administrator if that were the case.

In order to manage this effort, the author organized the search by the size of the enrollment of the institutions. Categories in this dimension for community colleges were *very large* (10,000+), *large* (5,000–9,999), *medium* (2,000–4,999), and *small* (500–1,999). This approach provided a structure for the process.

The goals of this study are as follows:

- Build on the national study of online learning leadership in U.S. colleges and universities.
- Develop a systematic and comprehensive list of leaders for online learning in two-year schools U.S. higher education.
- Collect institutional data for context.
- Gather information about the positions and professional experience of the leaders identified.
- Capture demographic and other information about these individual leaders.
- Investigate potential relationships among these factors and dimensions.

Research Questions

Our research questions are directly connected to the goals of this study:

1. What is the current state of online education at two-year institutions in the United States?
2. What is the nature of the professional experience of current leaders of online education in those two-year schools?
3. What are the backgrounds and demographics of the current leaders of online learning in those two-year schools?

These research questions guided the study and informed our methodology and survey instrument.

Review of Related Literature

The first study of online learning leaders explored organizational theories and concepts that help us understand the nature and approach of our colleges and universities. “Organized anarchy” is the term Cohen and March (1986) use to describe the uncertainty of governance in higher education, and they viewed ambiguity through the lenses of purpose, power, experience, and success. Similarly, the “concept of loosely coupled systems” (Weick, 1976) basically represents the decentralized structures within our institutions and the distributed academic authority inherent

in this organizational model. “Professional bureaucracy” (Mintzberg, 1979) can help explain the foundational role that faculty play in academic activities, such as online learning, and the emphasis on their authority and decision-making in this area. Lastly, the guiding approach of online learning leaders, supported by the idea of transformational leadership (Burns, 2003; Bass & Riggio, 2006), suggests the need for a collaborative style that inspires innovation and change as a catalyst for the organizational evolution that our institutions are pursuing.

These theories and concepts apply in many ways to this sector of higher education, but this article will not repeat the more comprehensive discussion of them in the first article. Instead, it seems more appropriate to reflect on the history and development of our U.S. community colleges as context for considering these institutions and the role of their online leaders.

The community college is an American innovation. Cohen and Kisker (2010) describe the post-Civil War period of 1870–1944 as the “University Transformation as the Nation Industrializes Era.” The creation of these two-year institutions during the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century was driven by multiple factors.

One reason for the creation of community colleges—or junior colleges as they were initially known—was the increase in the number of high school graduates (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). In the United States, the percentage of the 17-year-old population who were public or private high school graduates grew from less than 5% in 1870 to more than 50% by 1940, and the total number of people age 18 and 19 in the 1940s was just shy of 5 million (U.S. Department of Education, 1993).

Another reason for the establishment of junior colleges was that universities during this time could not accommodate every student who wanted to pursue higher education. Some university presidents encouraged other schools to adjust and respond to the new demand. President Harper from the University of Chicago suggested that junior colleges could help prepare students for a university education (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). He thought that the junior colleges could play a major role in providing the first two years of college. Some of the weaker colleges dropped the third- and fourth-year curricula and became junior colleges. The influence of universities continued through their oversight of the junior colleges, as was often required by state legislation.

In addition to preparing students for upper level studies, the junior colleges responded to the Industrial Age in the United States by stressing courses in occupational areas which immediately trained people for employment. Offering both of these options made these institutions relevant and drove notable growth in the number of institutions:

1922 – 207 junior colleges with total enrollment of 20,000

1930 – 450 junior colleges with total enrollment of 70,000

1944 – 600 junior colleges with total enrollment of 240,000. (Cohen & Kisker, 2010)

This growth was exemplified in California in the 1930s, where 49 junior colleges were funded through local property taxes just like secondary schools (Thelin, 2011). Another scholar of the sector, Robert Pedersen (1997), also acknowledged that junior colleges are situated at the interesting intersection of secondary schools and universities: “More often than not, community colleges are financed and governed much like a high school, describe themselves in the language of higher education, and yet champion the kind of community renewal once sought by Jane Addams through Hull House” (p. 500).

Pedersen (1997) continues with a reflection on community college faculty: “The derivative nature of the community college is most readily apparent in the often-ambiguous circumstances of community college faculty. With respect to their basic working conditions, the values that guide them as professionals, and their graduate-level preparation, community college instructors far more closely resemble university faculty than high school teachers” (p. 500). With that acknowledgement, Pedersen does recognize some limitations to their involvement with institutional governance. Clearly, this sector was influenced by both the local high schools as well as the universities.

Related to the notion of *localism* (the idea that no single institution could serve an entire state), junior colleges emerged in hundreds of communities (Thelin, 2011). Community leaders of the time were a driving force in the creation of local junior colleges. While they might have had modest resources, junior colleges were often considered part of a vital effort to support community life and plan for the future. A junior college was considered an appropriate addition to the city or community collection of institutions: “During this period, the civic leaders of small and large cities alike shared an enthusiasm for the future, a willingness to take risks, and a measure of opportunism—a spirit often summarized in the popular press of this period by the term ‘boosterism’” (Pedersen, 1997, p. 503).

This brief reflection on the development of community colleges tries to capture two different but very important roles these institutions aspire to provide: enabling students to be ready for a university education by offering the first two years of instruction, and preparing students to be immediately ready to enter the workforce through vocational programs and courses. At the intersection of these two roles is the spirit of being responsive to the needs of students. It seems that this institutional characteristic is an inherent part of the DNA of community colleges and might explain the early embrace of online education by this sector of higher education. The affordances of online learning and their benefits to students were a compelling reason for community colleges to offer courses and programs in this way. Being flexible and innovative with instruction might be considered a natural extension of how these institutions historically reacted to the needs of their students and communities. Through that lens, it seems understandable that these institutions have prioritized online learning and the importance of creating leadership positions for such vital initiatives. Therefore, it seems critical to include this sector in our studies of online learning leadership in higher education.

Methods

As noted earlier, a substantial effort was expended in order to develop a database of individual leaders for online learning and their contact information. The invitations to participate in the study in summer 2017 were presented per the following schedule:

1. Initial invitation on June 1, 2017
2. Reminder Invitation 1 on June 6, 2017
3. Reminder Invitation 2 on June 13, 2017
4. Final reminder invitation on June 20, 2017

The survey consisted of 32 multiple-choice questions that utilized a Likert-type scale and three open-ended questions.

The first section of the survey instrument collected information about the university and helped us answer our first research question about the current state of online education at the institution. The questions included the following:

- What is the enrollment size of your institution?
- Is your institution public or private?
- Where is your institution located?
- How do you and your institution define the scope of online learning for your position?
- What are the highest-level strategic goals for online learning at your institution?
- How many years ago did your institution create a leadership position for online learning?
- Has your institution used your online learning efforts as a catalyst for organizational changes?
- If your answer to the previous question was yes, what groups at your institution have been unified within your organization?
- Which of the following groups at your institution are under your direct responsibility?
- Does your institution use any online education service providers for specific functions?
- What are the top priorities or issues related to online learning for you and your institution?
- How would you describe the organizational approach to online learning at your institution?
- How is the online learning organization situated at your institution?
- What is the approach to tuition for online courses at your institution?

The second section of the survey instrument collected information about the professional experience of the online learning leader and helped us with the second research question. The questions included the following:

- How many years have you held this position of leadership for online learning?
- In addition to your leadership role for online learning, do you also hold a faculty appointment?
- How many years of traditional face-to-face classroom teaching experience do you have?
- How many years of online teaching experience do you have?
- How many years of management/leadership experience do you have?
- How many years of instructional design/curriculum development experience do you have?
- How many years of educational research experience do you have?
- How many years of IT (information technology) experience do you have?

The third section of the survey instrument collected information about the background of the online learning leader and helped us with the third research question. The questions included the following:

- What is your gender?
- What is your age?
- Whom do you report to?
- How many years have you served at your current institution?

- How many years of experience do you have in higher education?
- Which of the following degrees have you received?
- Which of the following are fields in which you earned a degree?
- Have you been an online student?
- Which of the following organizations or associations do you or your institution belong to?
- I plan on attending events or conferences from the following organizations or associations.
- Would you find it beneficial to develop a network of colleagues in this role and participate in that community?
- How do you stay informed about the state of online learning? (peers, methods, research, technologies, vendors, etc.)

The study reached out to 752 individuals, and 226 of them responded to this Web-based survey, resulting in a 30% response rate. The responses came from 44 states in the United States. The states missing from these responses were Alaska, Maine, Montana, North Dakota, Rhode Island, and Utah. The states missing from the group of responses are home to a total of only 17 community colleges (out of 1,024 = 1.6%), and leaders were identified at only 14 of them (out of 752 = 1.9%).

Results

The presentation of the results is organized by and aligned with the goals and research questions of the study. As noted earlier, these included identifying the background demographics of the online leaders, collecting institutional data for context, and gathering information about the online leaders' professional experience.

About the Individual Leader

The first area of inquiry for the study was focused on the personal characteristics of the individual leaders. As noted earlier, a significant aspect of this study was the identification of the appropriate individual at the institutions contacted, and that part of the process provided data about gender. A significant majority of the respondents (61%) were female. Relative to this factor, the response sample is not dramatically different than the identified population. It should be noted, however, that this majority of females is a notable difference from the study of university leaders, where the ratio was 50:50.

This distinction was a catalyst for exploring gender-related responses to questions in this study. Many of the questions that follow in this section were investigated with cross tabs and chi-square analysis. We found no statistically significant difference related to gender for any of the following factors:

- the enrollment size of the institution,
- how the institution defined the scope of online learning,
- how long ago the institution created this leadership position,
- if the institution used their online learning efforts as a catalyst for organizational change,
- to whom the position reported,

- whether the leader had been an online student,
- if the leader held a faculty appointment,
- years of service at their institution,
- years of experience in higher education, and
- years of professional experience with face-to-face classroom teaching, online teaching, management, instructional design, educational research, or IT.

Table 1

Gender

Gender	Identified population	Sample
Female	458 (61%)	143 (63%)
Male	294 (39%)	70 (31%)
Chose not to answer	-	13 (6%)
Total	752	226

The question about age indicated that 69% of the respondents were 45 or older. This compares to 77% of university leaders who were 45 or older.

Table 2

Age

Age	%
18–24	0%
25–34	4%
35–44	23%
45–54	35%
55–64	30%
65–74	4%
75+	0%
I choose not to answer.	5%

An important question in the study captured the reporting relationship for online learning leaders. More than half of the respondents stated that they reported to the provost/chief academic officer or other senior academic leader of the institution. While the specific percentage breakdown varied, this point was consistent across all institutional sizes. It should be recognized that despite the dependency on IT as a platform for online learning, only 3% of the leaders reported to the CIO. This is similar to the findings from the study of university leaders, and it validates the view that online learning is not an IT function.

Table 3

Reporting Relationship

Whom do you report to?	%
President	5%
Provost/chief academic officer	37%
Other senior academic leader	24%
Vice president/senior vice president (outside of academic affairs)	14%
CIO (chief information officer)	3%
Dean of a school	7%
Other	11%

The study captured leaders' length of service at their current institution as well as within higher education overall. Only 41% of the leaders had been at their current institution for at least 11 years, but 85% had worked in higher education for at least 11 years—and 35% had worked in higher education for more than 20 years. This depth of experience was consistent with the study of university leaders.

Table 4

Time at Institution

How many years have you served at your current institution?	%
Less than 1	6%
1–5	32%
6–10	20%
11–15	10%
16–20	17%
20+	14%
I choose not to answer.	0%

Table 5

Time in Higher Education

How many years of experience do you have in higher education?	%
Less than 1	0%
1–5	2%
6–10	12%
11–15	22%
16–20	28%
20+	35%
I choose not to answer	0%

Questions about academic preparation revealed that the highest degree earned by the majority of the community college leaders was a master’s (MA, MS, MBA, or MEd). Thirty-six percent of the leaders held a doctoral degree, and others shared that they were enrolled in a doctoral program. The majority (62%) held a degree in the field of education. Their university counterparts also earned degrees in the field of education (54%) but were more likely to hold a doctoral degree (66%).

Table 6

Fields of Academic Credentials

Which of the following are fields in which you earned a degree? (check all that apply)	%
Education	62%
Other	26%
Computer science/information technology	23%
Business	23%
Humanities	16%
Social sciences	15%
Natural sciences	7%
Healthcare	3%
Engineering	2%

Experience as a learner is vital, so the study inquired about whether the online learning leader had been an online student. It is impressive to note that the vast majority (86%) had been an online student—with more than one third earning a complete online degree. Only one out of seven did not have any online student experience. Sixty-five percent of university leaders had online student experience, and only 13% had earned an online degree. There was no significant difference in this finding across institutional size of the community colleges.

Table 7

Online Student

Have you been an online student? (credit bearing)	%
Yes – one online course	6%
Yes – multiple online courses	46%
Yes – an online degree program	34%
No	14%

Professional development and connections to associations were the last areas of inquiry for the first part of this study. Respondents reported on what organizations they belonged to, with the top entities being Quality Matters (QM), the Online Learning Consortium (OLC), the League for Innovation, and the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (ELI). The difference between these leaders and the university leaders is that the League for Innovation was the third association on the list. This makes sense given the prominence of the League for Innovation and its emphasis within this sector of higher education. The community college leaders also indicated what events they planned on attending, and conferences sponsored by OLC, QM, and ELI ranked as the top three.

Table 8

Associations

Which of the following organizations or associations do you or your institution belong to? (check all that apply)	Yes	Yes – but might drop	No – but might join	No
QM	59%	4%	10%	27%
OLC	52%	5%	13%	30%
League for Innovation	42%	2%	8%	48%
ELI	38%	2%	11%	49%
WCET - WICHE	32%	2%	11%	55%
USDLA	21%	2%	16%	61%
ISTE	13%	3%	11%	74%
NUTN	10%	0%	7%	83%
AECT	7%	1%	8%	84%
UPCEA	4%	1%	6%	89%
ADEC	4%	0%	13%	83%
ICDE	4%	0%	11%	86%

Table 9

Professional Development Conferences

I plan on attending events or conference from the following organizations or associations. (check all that apply)	No
OLC	44%
QM	43%
EDUCAUSE	31%
Other	30%
League for Innovation	17%
WCET - WICHE	14%
ELI	12%
USDLA	9%
ISTE	9%
AECT	3%
NUTN	3%
ADEC	2%
ICDE	2%
UPCEA	1%

Lastly, the leaders indicated their interest in connecting with peers. Nine out of 10 respondents stated that they would value the opportunity to develop a network of peers and participate in that community. This was slightly higher than the 88% of university leaders who favored networking with peers.

Table 10

Interest in Networking

Would you find it beneficial to develop a network of colleagues in this role and participate in that community?	%
Yes	90%
No	10%

When asked to answer an open-ended question about how they stay informed about the field, the leaders cited peers, research, and state organizations as the top three. The third choice is a difference from the study of university leaders, who cited conferences and associations, but it makes sense given that state-related affiliations are common with this sector of higher education.

Institutional Context

A foundational question for this study related to how institutions defined the scope of online learning for this leadership position. Similar to the university leaders, 68% of responses indicated that the community college leader was responsible for supporting all types of courses at the institution. This is in contrast to historically narrow views associated with distance education. This question was also explored by a number of variables through cross tabulations and chi-square analysis. We found no statistical differences related to enrollment size.

Table 11

Scope for Online Learning

How do you and your institution define the scope of online learning for your position?	%
Completely online courses	9%
Completely online and hybrid courses	17%
All courses	68%
Other	6%

Another aspect related to institutional context was the strategic goal for online learning. The most frequently selected strategic goal was “enhance student retention” and was followed by “promote instructional innovation.” This emphasis on growing institutional enrollments was the top strategic goal for the very large community colleges. In comparison, the top three strategic goals at U.S. universities were “grow total institutional enrollments,” “promote instructional innovation,” and “promote student engagement.”

Table 12

Highest-Level Strategic Goals

What are the highest-level strategic goals for online learning at your institution?	%
Enhance student retention	77%
Promote instructional innovation	74%
Grow total institutional enrollments above existing levels	73%
Promote student engagement	71%
Help maintain total institutional enrollments at existing levels	50%
Reach out-of-state-students	22%
Reach international students	9%
Other	10%

This study also captured when institutions created a leadership position for online learning. Some positions (39%) had been in place for more than 10 years, and the majority had been in place for 7–8 years or more. This might suggest the maturity of the effort at our community colleges where online education has been relevant and important for a long time. Breaking this down by enrollment size, there was a significant difference. It seems that very large enrollment schools have had this leadership position in place for some time. Not one very large institution reported a position being created in the last couple of years. This is another area of difference from U.S. universities, where the majority of leadership positions had been created in the past 5–6 years.

Table 13

When Leadership Position Was Created

How many years ago did your institution create a leadership position for online learning?	%
Less than 1	2%
1–2	6%
3–4	14%
5–6	14%
7–8	9%
9–10	8%
10+	39%
I choose not to answer	8%

Table 14 describes responses to a vital question in this study: whether the responding institutions used online learning as a catalyst for organizational changes. Similar to the study of university leaders, a key finding of this study was that almost three out of every four responses were yes. Breaking this down by enrollment size, how many years ago the leadership position was created, and to whom the position reported did not suggest differences that were statistically significant.

Table 14

Catalyst for Organizational Change

Has your institution used your online learning efforts as a catalyst for organizational changes?	%
Yes	71%
No	29%

Related to the issue of organizational change, the study asked what groups had been unified within the responsibilities of the online learning leader. More than half of the respondents identified instructional design, faculty development and training, course design and multimedia development, learning management systems, online learning policy development, and academic/educational technology as being pulled together at their institution. This was consistent with the organizational structure and approach of the universities. Breaking this down by the enrollment size of the institution did not show any differences from the combined total responses, with one exception. The course design and multimedia development unit was not included by more than 50% of respondents with the small enrollment institutions.

Table 15

What Groups Were Unified

What groups at your institution have been unified within your organization?	%
Learning management systems	74%
Faculty development and training	72%
Instructional design	70%
Online learning policy development	66%
Academic/educational technology	59%
Course design and multimedia development	56%
Center for teaching and learning	34%
Faculty IT support	33%
Library support for faculty	31%
Student services	29%
Advising	18%
Marketing	13%
Educational research	6%
Not applicable – there have been no changes to our organization	6%

Respondents were also asked about their use of online education service providers. The largest number (68%) cited learning management system (LMS) hosting. Not using any online education service provider was reported by 25% of the leaders. A modest number (21%) indicated the use of student support services, and 11% stated faculty support. With the exception of LMS hosting, the use of service providers seems to be in the minority, leaving community colleges to rely on their own capabilities. University leaders, in comparison, reported even less utilization of online education service providers.

Table 16

Use of Service Providers

Does your institution use any online education service providers for specific functions?	%
Learning management system (LMS) hosting	68%
Student support	21%
Faculty support	11%
Instructional design	7%
Multimedia development	6%
Curriculum development	5%
Marketing and recruitment	2%
We do not use any online education service providers	25%

The last aspect of institutional context for this study related to the top challenges faced by the online learning leaders and their institutions. Respondents were asked to rank order an extensive list of 14 issues, with 1 indicating the top priority. The top three priorities or issues were faculty development and training, providing student support, and strategic planning for online learning at your institution. This top-three list held true for all sizes of institutions except for the small institutions. In that case, the first two issues were the same, but the third was ensuring academic integrity. In comparison, university leaders reported the top three priorities as faculty development and training, strategic planning for online learning at your institution, and staffing for instructional design and faculty support.

Table 17

Top Priorities

What are the top priorities or issues related to online learning for you and your institution? (in ranked order)
1. Faculty development and training
2. Providing student support
3. Strategic planning for online learning at your institution
4. Ensuring academic integrity
5. Staffing for instructional design and faculty support
6. Funding and resources at your institution
7. Development of institutional policies for online learning
8. Evaluation/implementation of learning management systems
9. State regulations and SARA (State Authorization and Reciprocity Agreement)
10. Marketing and promotion of online courses and programs
11. Learning analytics
12. Conducting research about the effectiveness of online learning
13. Working with online education service providers
14. Development of a MOOC strategy

Another aspect related to institutional context was organizational approach to online learning. While the most frequently selected response was *an even balance of centralization and decentralization* (38%), the responses leaned toward centralization, with twice as many respondents (41%) selecting that versus 20% selecting decentralization. This item was a new question added to the survey instrument, so we are not able to compare this to the first study.

Table 18

Organizational Approach

How would you describe the organizational approach to online learning at your institution?	%
Centralized	17%
Most functions are centralized	24%
An even balance of centralization and decentralization	38%
Most functions are decentralized	14%
Decentralized	6%

Respondents were also asked how the online learning organization was institutionally situated. The vast majority (68%) of leaders indicated that their online learning group was a services organization that supported their academic departments. The next highest response, at 17%, was that online learning was supported through their center for teaching and learning and treated like any other mode of instruction. This item was a new question added to the survey instrument, so we are not able to compare this to the first study.

Table 19

Situating the Organization

How is the online learning organization situated at your institution?	%
It is a separate, stand-alone unit with its own courses and faculty at the institution	4%
It is a service organization that supports the academic departments at the institution	68%
It is managed by the continuing education unit at the institution	1%
It is supported through our center for teaching and learning and treated like any other mode of instruction	17%
Other	10%

Respondents were asked about their institutions' approach to tuition for their online courses. The vast majority (82%) of leaders indicated that their institution charges the same tuition as for their traditional classroom courses. No one indicated that they charged less, but 17% stated that they charged more for their online courses. This item was a new question added to the survey instrument, so we are not able to compare this to the first study.

Table 20

Tuition

What is the approach to tuition for online courses at your institution?	%
Higher than traditional classroom courses	17%
Tuition is the same as traditional classroom courses	82%
Lower than traditional classroom courses	0%

Summarizing the Professional Experience for the Leadership Position

To start to understand the professional experience for these online learning leaders, respondents first reported on their length of service in their current online learning leader role. More than 66% had been in the position for the past 5–6 years (or less), and more than half of that number had been in the position for 3–4 years or less. More than a quarter of the respondents had been in this role for more than 9 years. Even more university leaders (71%) had been in the position for the past 5–6 years (or less), and similarly, 54 % had been in the position for 3–4 years or less.

Table 21

Time in Position

How many years have you held this position of leadership for online learning?	%
Less than 1	9%
1–2	23%
3–4	23%
5–6	13%
7–8	6%
9–10	9%
10+	17%
I choose not to answer	2%

The study inquired about whether the leader also held a faculty appointment. Sixty-nine percent of the respondents did not hold any faculty appointment, 19% held a non-tenure-track appointment, and only 12% held a tenured or tenure-track appointment. Breaking this down by enrollment size did not suggest differences that were statistically significant. This was another area of difference from the first study. Half of the university leaders reported that they held a faculty appointment (24% tenure or tenure track and 26% with non-tenure track).

Table 22

Faculty Appointment

In addition to your leadership role for online learning, do you also hold a faculty appointment?	%
Yes – Tenure or tenure-track professor	12%
Yes – Non-tenure-track professor	19%
No	69%

Online learning leaders need to work with a number of groups on their campuses, including faculty, staff, students, and administration. Being able to relate to these constituencies is important and enabled by a blend of professional experiences. Therefore, this study investigated six areas of professional experience. The first area was traditional face-to-face classroom teaching. More than half of the respondents had at least 6 years of experience, and 17% had more than 20 years. In comparison to university leaders, 70% had more than 6 years of face-to-face classroom teaching experience, and 25% had more than 20 years.

Table 23

Face-to-Face Teaching Experience

How many years of traditional face-to-face classroom teaching experience do you have?	%
I do not have any	10%
Less than 1	5%
1–5	21%
6–10	22%
11–15	13%
16–20	11%
20+	17%
I choose not to answer	0%

The second area concerned online teaching. More than seven out of eight respondents taught online for at least a year, and 64% for more than 6 years. A similar number of university leaders had at least one year of online experience, and 48% had more than 6 years.

Table 24

Online Teaching Experience

How many years of online teaching experience do you have?	%
I do not have any	9%
Less than 1	4%
1–5	23%
6–10	30%
11–15	20%
16–20	13%
20+	1%
I choose not to answer	1%

The third area centered on management and leadership experience. More than half of the leaders had more than 11 years of management and leadership experience. The university leaders also had similar and notable experience in this area, with 66% responding with more than 11 years.

Table 25

Leadership Experience

How many years of management/leadership experience do you have?	%
I do not have any	1%
Less than 1	1%
1–5	20%
6–10	25%
11–15	20%
16–20	17%
20+	14%
I choose not to answer	1%

The fourth area inquired about experience with instructional design and curriculum development. Sixty-six percent of the respondents had more than 6 years of instructional design and curriculum development experience. The comparison is similar with university leaders, with 62% reporting more than 6 years of experience in this area.

Table 26

Instructional Design Experience

How many years of instructional design/curriculum development experience do you have?	%
I do not have any	10%
Less than 1	2%
1–5	20%
6–10	29%
11–15	15%
16–20	15%
20+	7%
I choose not to answer	2%

The fifth area asked about educational research experience. Only about one third of the leaders had 6 or more years of educational research experience. Almost a quarter of the leaders did not have any experience in this area at all. In comparison to university leaders, half of them reported 6 or more years of educational research experience, and only 14% did not have any.

Table 27

Educational Research Experience

How many years of educational research experience do you have?	%
I do not have any	23%
Less than 1	6%
1–5	35%
6–10	19%
11–15	6%
16–20	4%
20+	5%
I choose not to answer	3%

The sixth and last area asked about IT experience. Sixty-five percent of the leaders had at least 1 year of IT experience. It should also be noted that 27% of the leaders did not have any IT experience. Similar to the university leaders, it seems that there is a dependence on the traditional IT organization to provide a stable online learning platform at the institutions sampled.

Table 28

IT Experience

How many years of IT (information technology) experience do you have?	%
I do not have any	27%
Less than 1	6%
1–5	18%
6–10	14%
11–15	10%
16–20	10%
20+	13%
I choose not to answer	2%

The importance of broad experiences and the ability to work across the institution was reflected in comments made by the online learning leaders:

Coordinating online learning is a difficult role to manage in a college setting. Since faculty do not report to us, we have very little recourse if faculty do not meet their deadlines or follow established policies and procedures. Yet we are in the hot seat if deadlines are not met or policies or procedures are not followed. (Participant survey, 2017)

As a newer manager, who was eager to bring innovations to an older institution, it was very challenging to work with an administrator that had no online or technology experience. Identifying and dealing with issues such as entrenchment and evaluating an institutions readiness and ability to adapt and support online programs would also be recommended. (Participant survey, 2017)

DL Administrators wear many hats and must be experienced and knowledgeable across all college divisions. This is not something that is taught in a program but something that is learned through on the job experience. I think that as the older administrators retire in the next few years there is a risk of losing a large knowledge base if we are not careful. (Participant survey, 2017)

Even though one can have a title as a ‘Director’ there are many challenges with the organizational structure (faculty unions, interpretation of academic freedom, etc.) that could have a major impact on the role of authority in trying to implement quality assurance standards. (Participant survey, 2017)

Other participants offered perspectives on the strategic importance of online learning at their institution and the direction it may take in the future:

The sooner that online education is widely understood as an expansive concept that is integral to most everything we do in higher education, the better. I look forward to the day when online education (understood broadly) is the default and there are specialized people working in the Office of Time- and Place-Bound Education supporting those who work within the limitations of a traditional classroom. (Participant survey, 2017)

I have been responsible for online learning at four institutions of varying size, mission, and understanding/commitment to what online learning means and can offer. It is my experience that this role is critically [*sic*] strategically as it touches on every phase of student engagement, faculty success, and student retention as traditional onsite instruction, yet there is not an emerging or clear mechanism by which institutions coordinate or fold in online instruction. As we are pressed for resources at all levels, it will [be] crucial for institutional leaders who have this role but also higher up, to design and deliver learning opportunities that spend less time studying or tracking what's different about online vs. f2f learning but get at creating more seamless learning opportunities for students and more dynamic options for how faculty deliver that learning. (Participant survey, 2017)

The need for leaders to connect with their peers also emerged from the open-ended comments:

Many times, I feel I am “winging it”. I’m not sure of the answers. Nonetheless, I’m sure there are others in my position that feel the same way, and collectively we could find or create programs to support each other and our institutions simultaneously. (Participant survey, 2017)

Conclusions and Discussion

What did we learn from this study about online learning leaders in U.S. community colleges? The key findings could be organized into three areas: synthesizing the state of online learning and the leadership position at the institution, summarizing the experience of the individual leader, and identifying the similarities and differences of the community college online learning leaders with their university counterparts.

The online learning leaders at community colleges in the United States tend to have a broad view of online learning, with 68% reporting responsibility for supporting all types of courses, which is counter to a strict focus on distance education. Approximately three quarters of the institutions have used their online learning initiatives as a catalyst for organizational changes. Their top three strategic goals for online learning are to enhance student retention, promote instructional innovation, and grow institutional enrollments above existing levels. The top three priorities or issues for these institutions are faculty development and training, providing student support, and strategic planning for online learning at their institution. The use of external online learning service providers at U.S. community colleges seems focused on the hosting of their learning management system (68%) and some modest efforts with student support (21%).

The majority of institutions created their online learning leadership position more than 7 years ago, and the majority also have them report to the provost/chief academic officer of the institution or other senior academic leader. The top associations the leaders belong to for professional development are Quality Matters, the Online Learning Consortium, the League for Innovation, and the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative.

The synthesis of the data about the individuals leading this academic transformation and their experiences leads to a composite description of very seasoned leaders with a blend of essential experience. Eight-five percent of these leaders have more than 11 years of experience in higher education, and 35% have more than 20 years. The majority of these leaders hold a master's degree,

and 36% of leaders hold a doctoral degree. While only 31% of the respondents indicated that they also hold a faculty appointment, it is notable that 86% of them have taken at least one online course and have directly captured that online student experience.

As expected, there is some variation in background, but most have a blend of experience. Sixty-three percent have at least 6 years of face-to-face teaching experience (and 17% have more than 20). Eighty-seven percent have taught online for at least a year (and 64% for more than 6 years). More than half have more than 11 years of management/leadership experience. Sixty-nine percent of the leaders have at least a year or more of educational research experience. Sixty-five percent of the leaders have 6 or more years of instructional design experience. And 65% have at least one year of IT experience, but 27% have no IT experience.

Comparing University Leaders and Community College Leaders

An interesting result of this study is the ability to examine the areas that the online leaders at the community colleges have in common with the university leaders and where the two groups differ. While the comparisons were noted with the presentation of each item above, the following table is provided as a summary.

Table 29
Similarities and Differences

What do they have in common?	Where do they differ?
Scope includes all courses for majority of institutions	University leaders more likely to have a faculty appointment
Online learning as a catalyst for organizational change	University leaders more likely to hold doctoral degree
The same six units/activities are unified in organization	Community college leaders more likely to have online student experience
Reporting line through provost or chief academic officer	Community college leader positions have been in place longer
Faculty development and training the top priority	Top goal of community college leaders is student retention, and top goal for university leaders is growing enrollments
Associate with OLC, QM, and ELI	Community colleges more likely to use service providers
Years the individual has held this position and years of higher education experience	Community college leaders connected to state organizations
Professional experience (some)	University leaders more likely to stay informed through conferences and associations
Stay informed through peers and research	Gender – 61% female leaders in two-year institutions vs. 50% in universities

Limitations

I must acknowledge that this study is limited by participants who provided data about themselves and their institutions. It was a major effort to investigate more than 1,000 institutions and then reach out to 752 individual leaders. I'm extremely grateful to these colleagues and for their contributions to the study.

Final Thoughts on What the Field of Online Education Can Learn From This Study

This second study aspired to contribute to our field, our community, and higher education in general, to develop an understanding of the leaders in this important sector who are guiding these critical academic initiatives. Both studies help inform our thinking about the institutional perspective, how the colleges are organized for online learning, and the leadership they have in place for this strategic area.

Reflecting on the results of this second study, I would suggest that executives at these two-year institutions are depending on veteran leaders to guide academic endeavors that are vital for their future. With more than two decades of online learning leadership experience in U.S. higher education, I strongly believe that these positions are essential.

Similar to the first study, there are practical implications of this study that are worth repeating. One beneficial consequence of the second study is that the community college executives can benchmark their efforts with their peer institutions, as well as other higher education institutions. If they are considering adjustments to their organizations, this second study provides information about the groups and units that are commonly unified under these new online learning leaders. If the community college executives need to create or fill this position, hopefully this second study will guide their thinking and provide insight on the background and experiences needed for their new leader.

Just like the study of university leaders, the online learning leaders at our two-year institutions can assess their own background and experience as compared to the overall composite. They might evaluate areas of personal growth as well as consider the associations and conferences for networking and professional development.

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