

**Book Review: *Leading the eLearning Transformation of Higher Education: Leadership Strategies for the New Generation, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.***

**Gary E. Miller and Kathleen S. Ives (Eds.)**

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Indeed, leadership may be the most enigmatic pursuit of any organization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We know poor leadership when we see it (and feel it) and yet defining transformative leadership is often challenging even when it is visionary and right in front of us. We often revert to trait theory of great leaders or ascribe to new revisionist essays on leadership theory. In 2021, and despite having more information, knowledge, and resources at our fingertips than at any time in human history, unlocking the keys to the leadership kingdom remains at times, elusive. In their latest edition of *Leading the eLearning transformation of higher education: Leadership strategies for the new generation*, Miller and Ives (2020) have provided a timely reminder that empowering leadership is essential for the future of higher education and online learning.

The lessons of leadership are often harsh and yet enlightening teachers. Leadership during the pandemic has demonstrated that women can be great leaders during major crises and can succeed in transforming their organizations. We have learned that charisma is no guarantee of sustainable success and decision-making is not synonymous with sound judgment.

Culture and context matter yet many leaders ignore both. Leaders talk transformative change but soon learn that eloquent sound bites and a written plan are not the same as implementation (leading) and shifting and embedding core values and cultural norms in a modern university. Many leaders even convince themselves they coach and mentor when, in fact, they micro-manage key staff right out the door—the death of leadership.

The timeliness of this book is evident from the outset and comes at an unprecedented time in global higher education. The opening Foreword written by esteemed global professor, leader, educator, and editor of *The American Journal of Distance Education*, Dr. Michael Moore, asserts higher education is at a critical crossroads. He highlights that the intersection of leadership, online learning, and navigating through a global Covid -19 pandemic demands a renewed assessment and analysis of leadership.

This book is focused on online learning in American higher education. This fact, in and of itself, is not a limitation given that many of the topics and concepts have adaptive and replicable transfer potential to global contexts. This will be addressed in more detail later in the review summary.

The editors use the Preface to introduce the reader to the book's roadmap and chapters. The book is divided into three parts: Part I (4 chapters) covers the leadership context; Part II (7 chapters) examines operational effectiveness of institutions; and Part III (4 chapters) focus on sustaining the innovation. The reader should note that the editors of the book use the term eLearning as synonymous with online learning. This is not evident until early in the book and is important given this profession's predilection for conflicting terminology.

Chapter 1 opens Part I with Gary Miller providing an excellent overview of the higher education transformative environment. A succinct yet valuable historical overview of distance education is provided accentuating societal transformations serving as the catalysts for technology in education. Miller then outlined Sloan's Five Pillars of Quality in concert with the APLU's seven key components of online learning. Lastly, Miller highlights some emerging issues such as a potential trend towards K-14, OERs, micro-credentials, and greater collaboration-partnerships.

Eric Fredericksen provided a data rich chapter highlighting many key research findings from two major studies. The first study looked at university online leaders (2016) and the second community college online leaders (2017). The studies examined institutional and leader characteristics. Fredericksen provides an excellent summary in Table 2.1 of university-community college similarities and differences related to online leadership.

Three key similarities between universities and community colleges engaged in online learning are 1) it is used for organizational transformation; 2) faculty development and training are a priority; and 3) reporting for online learning leaders is through the chief academic officer. The author's data make a salient point of the immense challenges and difficulties of being an online-distance education leader in higher education.

The online learning organization is a service organization, not an academic unit, despite needing the academic reporting line for support and credibility. Indeed, in 2021, we see more senior level online leadership positions, but the informal academic culture of the university still echoes—content resides in the Colleges.

In Chapter 3, Gary Miller discusses leading online learning from the mainstream – in other words with less difficulty advocating and obtaining support for distance education than he or the reviewer (and some of the authors) had to overcome during an earlier era. This chapter gives the reader a solid sense of the key elements of change and just how difficult and complex sustainable change for online learning can be in organizations driven by a long historical mission, culture, and core values. Miller outlines the basics of ethical realism towards fostering this level of change. A key observation presented by Miller is that leading from the mainstream treats the university as a social organization rather than a business organization.

Cristi Ford and Kathleen Ives close Part I with a brilliant and sensitive discussion of leadership and diversity. The authors rightly point out that equity and equality are not synonymous. Equity means people will travel different paths to advancement; equality means everyone will have equal opportunity for advancement. Despite these considerations and the fact that the data in higher education often reflect the broader society, the numbers are disconcerting.

Only 26% of American institutions are led by women despite those same institutions serving 59% women. Moreover, it comes as no surprise that under-represented and marginalized minority groups are affected more adversely. Mentoring and empowerment activities need to be increased and most importantly senior leadership sets the tone for diversity for the entire institution. Interestingly, the authors cite data that suggest by 2050, nearly 48% of the overall workforce will be women and that there will be no clear ethnic majority.

We need to focus our training and leadership programs more closely on leading diverse workforces that include broad diversity in gender, age, race, experience, disabilities, and sexual orientation. The term that has emerged for this is called *cultural agility*—the capacity of a leader to lead across diversity has also been applied to leaders taking posts outside their countries and having to lead these diverse multi-national organizations.

The author diversity in this book is disappointing overall. Given the intensity and magnitude of these issues have been accentuated in American society and higher education the past five years; and the fact this is the second edition of this book, a better author balance by the editors could have reflected the ethnic diversity of American college and university online leaders. Future editions of this book should be more cognizant of these diversity considerations.

Chapters 5 and 6 are written by Peter Shea and Karen Swan. Chapter 5 examines online learning and distance education effectiveness in general. These authors provide a consummate reference list to tell us there are no real significant differences between face-to-face (f2f) and online teaching. The reader is reminded that in recent years the SMART classrooms on campus are using digital tools which are often termed *blended* yet are likely closer to online courses than our traditional f2f courses.

The authors cover Community of Inquiry theory-survey <https://coi.athabasca.ca/coi-model/coi-survey/> and the role of teacher, social and cognitive presences as well as interaction theory, design, and contributions to critical thinking. The authors cover the various online learning outcomes and note that learning effectiveness in online is supported by faculty development, faculty-student support services, and the affordances of the digital arsenal.

Chapter 6 extends the focus on what leaders should know about online teaching per se, emphasizing various theoretical learning frameworks—constructivism, connectivism, andragogy, and heutagogy. The authors close by offering insightful observations around Community of Inquiry theory, MOOCs, competency-based education, and the emerging uses of Artificial Intelligence (AI). The reference list in each chapter is superb and the reader is encouraged to review these as part of their own leadership portfolio.

In Chapter 7, Larry Ragan, Thomas Cavanaugh, Ray Schroeder, and Kelvin Thompson provide a poignant discussion of the critical need to offer quality faculty support services. These include preparing online teachers, assessing how leaders can use adjunct faculty, and suggestions for professional development. The authors provide an excellent list of ten competencies for online faculty members which is the heart of this chapter and invaluable for the reader. This chapter reminded the reviewer that initial online training programs for faculty members should be online—and use the technology to teach about teaching with technology.

Chapter 8 examines student support services in online learning. The authors, Meg Benke, Victoria Brown, and Joston Strigle, outline how support services can engage students, reduce attrition and related transactional distance issues, identify high risk students, and help students feel more connected to the program and the institution. The authors further noted rightly that given online learning leaders tend to report to the Academic VP or Provost (70%+), the online leader will need to foster and build alliances with the student services VP and staff across the institution. The chapter also includes practical, mini case studies.

How do we mainstream technology into the institution? In Chapter 9, David Andrews, Colin Marlaie, and Andrew Shean provide a succinct overview of the evolution of the classroom from traditional f2f to online. The emerging view that students are behaving like customers of other goods and services—in this case the service or product is education—is discussed. The issue of faculty as guides is also considered.

The authors leave the reader with emerging models to consider such as skills development, self-directed or self-determined learning, learning analytics, and questions about costs, efficiencies, and regulatory elements affecting mainstream technology adoption.

Cyndi Rowland and Kelly Hermann provide an excellent overview of accessibility issues related to online learning and leadership in Chapter 10. The authors highlight key issues around instructor training, legal requirements, tech standards, and course design elements for serving those with disabilities. Moreover, the authors assert that online leaders must take their leadership responsibility seriously to ensure that the online continuum provides equitable and readily accessible services in support of students with special needs.

In Chapter 11, Ray Schroeder took us on delightful road trip encompassing operational leadership in the strategic context. Using the UPCEA Hallmarks of Excellence in Online Learning (2019), he provides a detailed and practical discussion of the key success factors for online leadership: internal advocacy, entrepreneurialism, faculty support, student support, digital technologies, external advocacy, professionalism, and vision making. Experienced leaders in higher education and distance education will embrace this chapter embedded in deep experience and practice of managing any sub-unit in the modern university.

What does quality mean in the context of the online organization and the leader at the helm? In Chapter 12, Jennifer Mathes and Kay Shelton provided an instructive snapshot of quality factors to consider in the online enterprise. They emphasize the importance of program evaluation and distinguish between course and program evaluation. The authors focus on the OLC Quality Scorecard and how online leaders can use this to assess their own organization (<https://onlinelearningconsortium.org/consult/olc-quality-scorecard-suite/>).

In Chapter 13, Meg Benke and Mary Niemiec discussed leading beyond the organization which refers to how leaders can engage in outside organizations, agencies, partnerships, government policy development, and activities related to the field of online learning. The authors provide a good summary of various academic boards, professional associations such as OLC, WCET, UPCEC, accrediting associations, and agencies. This is an excellent resource chapter for new online leaders exploring online partnership options and engagement with diverse external organizations.

Chapter, 14, *Preparing to Lead the eLearning Transformation*, written by Kathleen Ives, Devon Cancilla, and Larry Ragan, begins with a discussion of the three generational phases of online leadership. The authors argue that the third phase of the future of online leadership is still evolving. This is critical given the current pandemic has not defined a clear *new normal* and the assumption that the entire world has adopted online learning for the long-term may be premature

The authors spend considerable narrative describing the background and rationale for creating the Institute for Emerging Leadership in Online Learning (IELOL, <https://onlinelearningconsortium.org/learn/ielol/>) founded by Penn State in 2009 and now managed under OLC. Despite the authors suggesting that this program was created to fill a non-existent professional development void, in fact, the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET) had created the Institute for the Management of Distance Education (MDE) in 1995 and this ran for 11 years. It brought together 80–100 managers, directors, support personnel, and faculty members from across the country for a week-long institute. The faculty included 15 of the top distance education and emerging online learning professionals during this period.

Leadership in online learning, as the authors note, was different from 1995–2006 for MDE, which is exactly why the IELOL was created at the right time for the right reasons for the emerging new leadership. The International Council of Open and Distance Learning (ICDE) also holds an annual President's Summit, formerly called the Standing Conference for Presidents (SCOP) which from the mid-1980s right up to the present focuses on emerging leadership and trends in distance learning. University presidents and senior leadership come together for three days to discuss strategic leadership of distance and online learning at their institutions and in their respective regions of the world.

The authors conclude their chapter with an excellent summary of key competency domains for online learning drawn from the multitude of professional development programs, practice, and collaborations since 1995. These include strategic visioning, digital leadership, budgeting, leading change, shared governance, and partnerships. A brief discussion of future trends concludes the chapter.

Indeed, I highly recommend this book to any existing and emerging American online leaders in higher education, including online learning leaders in business, government, healthcare, and other sectors. What is delightfully deceptive about this book is that nearly all the chapters are enjoyable reads and yet they are all indelibly immersed in a conclave of scholarly research and written by very experienced leaders in the online learning field. The reference lists alone and their quality are an invaluable resource in this book.

A great book does not have to answer all the questions; sometimes revealing new vantage points about critical questions in which we collectively must pursue in our quest for

progress is valuable. One of the most important lessons from this book is the reminder that online leadership in 1995, in 2005, and in 2015 were very different. More importantly, online leadership post-pandemic will also look very different. We certainly should not be surprised by this fact on the road to 2030. Our operational context of leadership changes and hence, how we envision the leadership continuum must evolve within the context and culture of online education.

At the end of the day, this book should be on your shelf because it is not only written with a sense of optimism and realism from where we have evolved in online leadership during the past twenty-five years; it has ironically reminded us of Will Rogers' famous quote "Good judgment comes from experience and a lot of that comes from poor judgment." We have learned many of those harsh lessons I mentioned at the outset over the past twenty-five years.

Are there limitations and critiques that deserve mention? Yes. I would suggest, however, that the reader view these as delimitations—choices made by the editors that recognize one cannot cover everything and make everyone happy. Let's look at these objectively.

As already mentioned, the book is focused on American online higher education to the extent the title should probably be *Leading the eLearning Transformation in American Higher Education* when the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition is published. This is by no means suggesting that many elements and strategies from this book cannot be adapted and replicated in other countries by other institutions. Nonetheless, to do this one must understand the global landscape, culture, and the parameters of cultural agility—leading across diverse organizations in other global markets and countries. Moreover, this book reflects norms of a developed country in term of resources and technology, and these simply do not exist in most developing nations.

Without question, this book would be strengthened with an in-depth chapter or two on global online learning by experienced professionals who traverse U.S. and global higher education leadership. Such a chapter would give the reader a comparative sense of how online development is evolving (or foundering) with its opportunities, challenges, and issues globally in developing and developed countries. I would still strongly recommend this book to distance and online professionals outside the U.S. given that the adaptive potential of the scholarship, strategies, theoretical frameworks, and best practices for global distance and online learning sectors are excellent.

Are there any critical topics missing from this book? Within the context of delimitations, this is more preference than critique. A few topics might be given more attention in the future including leading change, empathy, common sense, judgment, finance, calm under fire, and global cultural diversity.

This book makes a valuable contribution to the research and to online learning leadership in the U.S. I recommend this book without reservation, and I applaud the editors and the authors in bringing together this resource for present and future online learning leaders.

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### **References**

Miller, G. E. & Ives, K. S. (Eds.) (2020). *Leading the eLearning transformation of higher education: Leadership strategies for the new generation, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.* Stylus Press.