

## **Leadership Distance Learning:** *Are You Lonesome Tonight?*

### **PRESENTER:**

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### **50-WORD DESCRIPTION:**

This learner-centered, audience-engaging presentation focuses on how one university is using web-based, geographically dispersed and diverse student cohorts to learn how to be leaders in a wildly popular new undergraduate major – Organizational Leadership. Actual course material on the web will be demonstrated and discussed with much open sharing of ideas on this new model that is quickly becoming the Soul of Leadership education.

## Leadership Distance Learning: *Are You Lonesome Tonight?*

### **ABSTRACT**

This presentation will share what the new evolving soul of leadership learning may be – distance and team learning. The presenter will focus on one sample leadership course within the newest and fastest growing program at Wright State University – Organizational Leadership. Using web-based student cohorts, this new program, including this one sample leadership seminar course, is taking technology and making it work in our quest to grow leaders through education. By “teaching outside the box”, we are meeting and exceeding the *diverse* needs of a *diverse* student population so they are better equipped to lead and manage others in *diverse* organizations. This team-based course using web learning goes to great lengths to ensure students are not “lonesome tonight” (or any other night or day) as they sit at their computers at all hours and share, learn and grow through distance leadership education.

### **INTRODUCTION (including LEARNER OBJECTIVES)**

Distance learning is here to stay in higher education – both at the graduate and undergraduate levels. Wright State University, in Dayton, Ohio, is embracing this emerging format and delivery model with heart and Soul; This is especially apparent in the BS-completion program in Organizational Leadership.

Wright State University, a metropolitan university that is not yet 40 years old, has an enrollment of nearly 16,000 students and over 100 undergraduate programs. The Organizational Leadership (O.L.) program is its fastest growing undergraduate program, with nearly 500 students in a major that just turned “3”. The O.L. program is a multidisciplinary, application-oriented, nontraditional student-centered program which has grown exponentially, primarily because its creative delivery, content and format are realistic and immediately relevant to current and future leadership needs in all organizations.

This presentation will highlight those leadership learning components by focusing on one sample course within the major – Organizational Leadership Seminar. This course uses small cohorts (4-6 person student teams) and incorporates an extensive use of web-based learning. The student teams work together to discuss actual “real world” cases focusing on issues they will deal with soon, or are dealing with now if currently employed. For example, we examine women in leadership, geographically dispersed team building, and hiring diverse workers.

The audience will get to see samples of the web assignments and will experience WebCT as if they were a student. They will also have an opportunity to learn and share their own lessons working with leadership distance education.

### **Learning Objectives for Presentation**

1. To observe and understand how web-based and distance learning works with leadership education

2. To understand how team development can happen with little or no physical interaction time.
3. To challenge the audience to think creatively about how best to teach leaders to lead in the workplaces of today and tomorrow.

## **BACKGROUND**

The presenter has been a faculty member in the O.L. program at Wright State University since the program started in early 2001. It became clear from working with the first small group of nontraditional O.L. majors that they craved relevance, application, and deep thinking with their education. The pressure for creative alternatives to the “traditional educational model” sent me to learn more about distance learning options, primarily web-based educational approaches. My limited experience teaching with the web was woefully inadequate for what was needed. I immersed myself into the platform Wright State used – WebCT. The key to our learning WebCT was education, education, education. I attended workshops, sat in on other faculty’s use of WebCT, went to idea sharing sessions, took more workshops, and spent many days and nights in self-study. I learned much by many trials, and almost as many errors. As I incorporated more of WebCT into the course and program, we all became more comfortable with the technology, and how to teach and learn using it. Also vitally helpful on this web learning journey was the constant learning from an experienced and willing mentor.

## **HOW IT WORKS**

For this course, the students physically meet during Week #1 (in an 11-week quarter, including exam week which is used for other purposes). They interact in fun, tailored, team-focused activities to actively engage them, and to show them that this course is going to be different. They then fill out a fairly detailed information inventory card sharing their experiences, their dream careers, and what they like to do and/or are good at doing. Once they do this, they take a break in order to have time to place them into diverse teams with a blend of experiences. They then are submerged in creative work to name their team and develop Team Rules of Engagement (these Norms are Vital to develop in Week #1 and to revisit later). I then cover the syllabus in depth, and show them how to use WebCT to ensure we are all comfortable with it. After that first night, they are placed into student cohorts of 4-6 students and they remain in these teams for the duration of the course.

For Week #2, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8, they are meeting “on the web” so they do not physically show up for class. They are assigned actual cases from their case book for each of those weeks. The questions for each case pop up on their WebCT home page on Mondays at midnight. They have exactly 4 days to read the case, read the questions and then develop their coherent, clear and complete responses INDIVIDUALLY. This is Phase 1. For Phase 2 (midnight Friday to midnight Monday), they must read each of their team mates’ responses and respond to the group. There is a detailed rubric in the syllabus that shows them what an “A” case reply is, what a “B” would look like, etc. After the Phase 2 deadline, I post the “what really happened” epilog for this case, since it is an actual organizational leadership case. They love and learn from what actually occurred to the “characters” and situation in the case. During Week 5, they meet and

tweak their Norms, if necessary. They also provide the instructor feedback on how to improve the learning.

## **RESULTS TO DATE**

*Student comments in italics*

Positive comments are the overwhelming majority, and center on:

1. *Very real world and helpful.*
2. *Affords busy working adults much needed schedule flexibility.*
3. *Get to hear from all team members, not just the “vocal” ones.*
4. *Great to see diversity of perspectives.*
5. *Wonderfully rich discussion.*
6. *Model for what we need to, and will, wrestle with – not just content, but the mode of learning (web/computer-based).*

Negative comments (there are very few) center on:

1. *Case was complex (as are most, real workplace issues)*
2. *Not everything in case was relevant to what I would do (and leaders have to sort the wheat from the chaff)*
3. *I ran out of time to do it (time management – critical leadership skill)*
4. *I didn't like everyone on my team (again, modeling real life)*

## **CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS**

This is a powerful and wonderful leadership learning model. Vast majority of students (and now O.L. graduates who have provided rich feedback during OL Graduate Panel Nights) feel this is a great way to learn content and how to work together in a way that mirrors what they need to know in “the real world”.

I will continue with the model, but continually seek a diverse assortment of cases that focus on issues relating to leading in organizations.