

# iPrincipals: Innovative Themes, Strategies, and Recommendations of Ten Online University Educational Leadership Programs

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*This report, the second in a series, provides comparative empirical data on current state and national university trends around the thematic strategies and constructs ten fully online Educational Leadership programs engage within their innovative designs. Our 2014 iPrincipals report provided information on how one California University transitioned their fully onground program to both a hybrid model, and subsequently to a fully online delivery, in their preparation of school leadership candidates. Current findings, presented within this report, reflect the broader state and national perspectives of Educational Leadership program faculty, and administrators, in their preparation of iPrincipals.*

As twenty years of growth in online course delivery across university programs continues to steadily increase, our understanding of online practice, as faculty within educational leadership programs, assists us to both apply empirical trends within our discipline, and to assess their more local effectiveness and quality to enhance our EDL candidates' learning (McBeth, 2008). We can ask, "How often do we continue to do things in a certain manner just because they have always been done that way? Have we ever felt that our actions are not bringing the results we desire? Are we looking for new paths to our desired results... and routinely?" (p 70)

Aristotle noted, "*We are what we repeatedly do.*" Within our "doing" of school leadership, we have learned effective educational leadership makes a difference in improving learning (Leithwood, et.al, 2004, p 3). The 21<sup>st</sup> century educational reformers, like Linda Lambert, Victoria Bernhardt, Richard Elmore, Larry Lezotte, Peter Senge, Richard DuFour, Mike Schomoker, Doug Reeves, and many others have repeatedly urged the reform of school practices, and others, such as Michael Fullan, in his 2001 "The Moral Imperative," have provided us no other choice but to change our ways. (McBeth, 2008, p. 3)

As the dialogues around school change, and the mandated reforms ensuring them, have endured for over forty years, online technologies, particularly those including course delivery, paralleled them. Questions of quality and effectiveness arose, and remain the foci of assessments for which accrediting bodies demand evidence, including alignments to state and national standards. A comparative analysis of the thematic strategies and constructs of ten fully online

Educational Leadership and Administration: Teaching and Program Development

Volume 26, March 2015

ISSN 1064-4474 © 2015 California Association of Professors of Educational Administration

university educational leadership programs is presented here. The study's findings hold significance for designers of fully virtual school leadership training programs as EDL faculty and administration share their perspectives around building and nurturing *iPrincipals*, (Marcos & Loose, 2014) for both traditional and virtual schools.

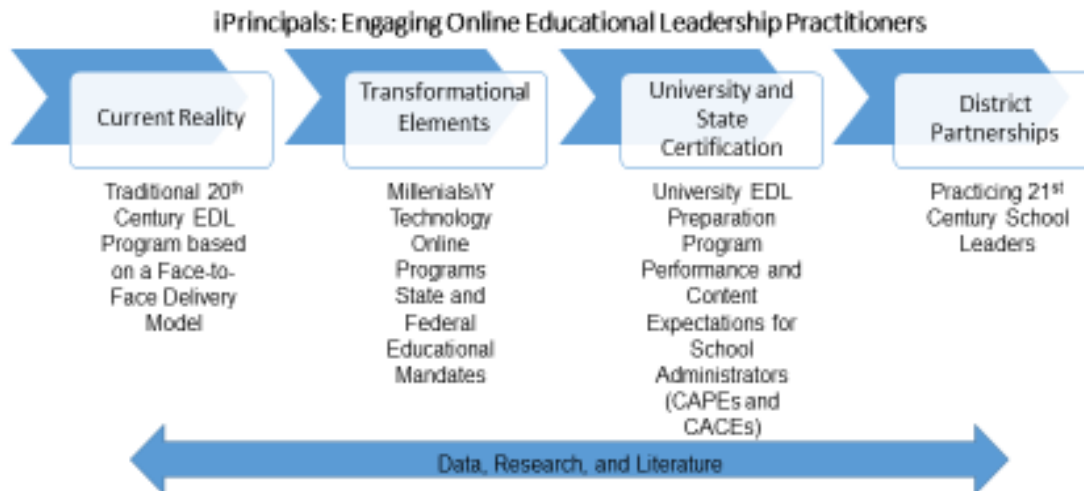
### **Building and Nurturing the Virtual Educational Leader's Mindset**

#### **Innovations and Technologies**

Knowledge is necessary to growing dynamic, successful online programs, particularly within a continuous improvement model. We found faculty are focused on the iY generation while striving to meet the learning needs of these future school leaders. Virtual leaders are also virtual learners seeking transformation, thus, among the first of the innovations we found considered in the design of these ten fully online EDL program designs was that of cohort models supported through focused recruitment.

As the migration from fully face-to-face, to hybrid, to fully online occurred, SKYPE interviews for admission became a reality for many programs. Built within these designs were some state sponsorships and funding, as well as certificate programs in addition to the more traditional degree and licensure programs. Professional growth plans became a part of programs, as well. The technologies important to these programs' effective delivery were identified by faculty as, Moodle Rooms, Angel, Blackboard, TaskStream, Customized by Institution, SABA (like Go to Meeting), Jing Video, Prezi, CamTasia, GoogleDocs, Hangout, and Adobe Connect.

The researchers, who have personally experienced this transition from a fully traditional face-to-face program to the new online delivery content modules, believe that several factors and forces are in conflux bringing about this rapid change to university programs that seek to prepare and license the next generation of school leaders and administrators. These factors and forces are presented in the following model, and have led, it is believed by the researchers, to the current state of many educational administration programs that are now being delivered online:



### Applied Nature of Online Educational Leaders' Learning

- Accessible – Collaborative Cohorts, Peer Projects
- Consistency in Course Delivery – Candidates Receive Identical Content and Materials
- Action Research & Case Study Projects – Specific Alignment of Candidate Inquiry to School Settings
- Practitioner Taught by Highly Qualified FT and Adjunct Instructors
- Field Experiences – Embedded in Coursework from Outset of Program, Supervised by University and Site Mentors Espousing Authentic Tasks
- Assessments – Signature Assignments, ePortfolios, Journals, Focus Groups, Regional Advisory Boards, Candidate Evaluations
- Successful Initial Employment and Subsequent Promotions in School Leadership Positions

Loose, W., & Marcos, T., 2014

Upon the successful transition of their EDL program from a traditional model, to hybrid, to fully online, the researchers, employed by a large private, non-profit university, embarked on a journey of discovery for more detailed, comparative empirical data. The researchers report their findings here, around the successful transitions of ten educational leadership programs comprising nine private non-profits, as well as one California State University program (Marcos & Loose, 2014).

The following findings are reported from faculty and administrators of ten online EDL programs who were interviewed by the researchers. In reporting the findings from the participants, the initial theme of the respondent is provided in italics for the reader. Each item is additionally provided clarifying information about the specific finding.

### Developing Authenticity in Online Practitioners

#### **Relevance, Current Practice, and Field Experiences**

The researchers used the following prompt in the interview process regarding relevance:

*Of what relevance to current leadership practice in P-12 schooling does your program espouse?*

The participants provided a variety of answers to this query. One of the primary foci was the *specific alignment of inquiry to the school setting*. Seven out of ten university professors strongly advocated that the candidates scan their current school environments to identify current

issues, problems, and challenges addressing improvement of the overall academic achievement of the students at the school. This process provides real-world experience and relevance for the candidates.

Once candidates, through the inquiry process, identify potential areas of need, they design an *Action Research/Case study* as part of their online program. In some instances, some programs lead the candidate through a research course to further identify and codify the area that the candidate will be working on. Often, this topic then becomes the primary topic of the case study, and the candidate then uses this topic throughout the rest of their program applying the content of the courses they are taking to their selected case study area and topic. For example, if a candidate selected the impact of a reading program intervention for special education students, one of their university courses in the program for educational policy would have a primary assignment (sometimes referred to as a signature assignment) on the laws and policies that are pertinent to special education.

The respondents also spoke to the importance of the *meaning and relevance to the candidates' demographics*. Professors spoke about the importance of carefully examining the case study in the scope of the school/district's specific and unique demographics. Part of the concern expressed was being sensitive to cultural and societal mores in consideration of possible generalizability to larger populations. That is, preliminary findings of school populations in multi-cultural Southern California may not be generalizable to similar school configurations on the Eastern part of the United States (and vice-versa) possibly due to these demographic influences and differences.

The interviews also found that the respondents reported that the candidate's courses were delivered by *multiple practitioners still currently active in the field*. The opinions expressed in the interviews were that adjunct instructors, in conjunction with university full-time faculty, provided the strongest instructional delivery for aspiring candidates ensuring the most up-to-date content in the courses based on current developments in the actual school systems.

Respondents generally reported that *faculty professional development is ongoing* (certifications and accreditations for Institutes of Higher Education (IHE), in addition to the actual practices in the field). This is particularly true in the current IHE environment in California as the Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) is in the process of recertifying the preliminary and clear credential processes and requirements to which all California universities granting administrative credentials must realign their program to remain in compliance. Part of the new clear credential requirements will include a mentoring/coaching component that will require initial and on-going training by the university mentors assigned as coaches/mentors to clear credential candidates.

Participants additionally indicated that the *retention rates are very high (95%)* in these administrative credential programs. Candidates may be motivated to complete these programs because they are graduate students who have often demonstrated success in previous program credential completions (and hence, they have experience and knowledge as to successful university strategies). Further, these candidates may also envision that by completing an administrative program, there is a greater chance of career advancement and this is part of a strategy to advance their professional career.

Eight out of ten faculty and administrators reported that graduates of their programs had a high level of success *in the applied nature of the program* that led to initial employment as entry-level administrators for most candidates, and that many candidates also were successful in subsequent years in achieving promotions in higher administrative positions. While there was no

longitudinal study regarding these data, the professors related this information based on anecdotal evidence and continued contact with the candidates upon completion of the program. A possible future study could be to develop a longitudinal study regarding these candidates and programs to look for possible correlations and causality that may be most effective for promotions of school administrators beyond the initial employment phase that could be included in the preparation programs.

Program assessments often *included electronic measures (ePortfolios)*. This is not overly surprising in an online program. These electronic portfolios documented the rate of candidate's learning and was gathered, collected, and evaluated by the university at specific transition points in the program. This was often accomplished as part of or in coordination with field work assignments that the candidate was competing as part of the administrative credential requirements.

### **Creating Major Goals and Student Learning Outcomes**

The researchers used the following prompt in the interview process regarding field experiences: *How do your faculty members supervise field experiences for state principal licensure?*

Almost universally, EDL programs were focused on preparing the candidates to obtain their states' credential/license to be a school administrator. An important part of the preparation process is the fieldwork/experience component as these experiences provide actual real-life practice in solving issues and problems that newly credentialed administrators would be expected and need to be able to accomplish in the scope of their duties.

Respondents reported that the fieldwork/experience normally *begins at outset of program (first course)*. This is to provide a complete experience for the candidate with the goal that the candidate have the opportunity for field work experience covering an entire school year beginning with the opening of a school year and culminating with the closure tasks of completing the school year. Candidates engaged in field experience covering a complete school cycle would then be ready to start an administrative career at any point during a school year and have some idea as to the typical operations and issues encountered in that part of a school year cycle.

In coordination with the University fieldwork/experience supervisor, seven programs require that the candidate identify and work with a *local site supervisor to ensure that the candidate is involved in authentic tasks*, and three programs include field experience that is embedded into coursework. The local site supervisor serves as the day-to-day observer and evaluator ensuring authenticity as well as quality in the field work tasks being performed. Additionally, the site supervisor also initiates the self-reflective process for the candidate asking the candidate to contemplate *how did this go? How could this have been done better?* This is then followed up by a deeper reflection with the university supervisor as the program continues. The researchers found no difference between privates in California and across the nation, nor between privates and CSU.

The faculty and administrators related that the customary process for the *fieldwork/experience was embedded in coursework and assignments* that the candidate had in the university program. *The university supervisor would also with follow up on-site visits and/or phone calls*. The purpose of the on-site visits and phone call was to assess progress, checking for issues/problems, and to ensure that the candidate was progressing through the completion of the fieldwork requirements at an appropriate rate. The researchers additionally found that

components of most fieldwork experiences were *practicum based (site based)* with the candidate completing experiences at their current school site working in coordination with their site administrators.

As noted above, the candidates also normally used ePortfolios as the medium to document and provide artifacts of the fieldwork experiences being completed. Professors added that candidates' ePortfolios served many candidates as a source to use for initial and job promotion interviews. Thus, the ePortfolio served a dual purpose and not only documented candidates' actual on-the-job experience for interview purposes, but also provided evidence of the candidate's requirements for program completion. The ePortfolios and fieldwork experiences also contained *projects* that the candidates completed. Some respondents reported that *videos were also used as documentation* for the candidate's fieldwork requirements.

Finally, the professors indicated that the fieldwork/experience components of the program provided an *intentional window of contact (university/candidate)* providing a strong connection between the theory of the university program and the real-life application of the theories into practice.

### **Quality Courses, Online Effectiveness, and Rigor**

#### **Assessments, Quality, and Existing Gaps**

The researchers used the following prompt in the interview process regarding assessment:

*What assessments are in place to ensure quality program outcomes?*

The assessment portion of the program was very important to the respondents because this was a critical part of the compliance and accreditation component for the university and subsequently the university's ability to recommend candidates for licensure. This important linkage required that the university's assessment to serve both the functions of providing an evaluation/grade for the candidate as well as meeting the state's requirements for the candidate to obtain licensure.

Respondents, at both privates and CSU, reported several methods of assessment, the most common being, *ePortfolios*, reported in use at all ten institutions. Another assessment commonly found was *journaling by the candidates that was reviewed by the university supervisor*. Candidates reported to their professors that this self-reflective experience was often very powerful for themselves and especially so following a major issue/problem resolution and in conjunction with a year-in-review consideration.

Eight respondents reported the use of *capstone projects* similar in nature to the case study/research projects candidates were completing as part of their real-life authentic experiences. Two institutions require a thesis. These culminating experiences were reported of high value to the candidates. Candidates felt the results of the capstone project often were helpful in addressing current issues/problems at the school site. This positive experience provided a strong sense of accomplishment for the candidate that led to a feeling of competence and confidence encouraging the candidate to carry this successful experience forward in becoming an entry level administrator who had the ability to successfully assess and address school problems.

Also universally reported were *required evaluations by (university/site supervisors)*. These evaluations between the two levels of sources were regularly compared and contrasted to look for areas of strength and needed improvement of the candidate. Using these two levels of evaluations as a triangulation instrument and process, the university mentor/instructors and the

day-to-day site supervisors could make recommendations regarding areas around additional field experiences that may need to be completed by the candidate before completion of the program.

Also reported were the use of assessment scales that indicated the *levels of competence* of the candidate. A typical rating scale was (I) introduced, (D) developed, (M) mastered. The scale adopted by the university was normally connected to both the capstone project and signature assignments completed by the candidate. The *rubrics and syllabi used by the universities were state standards aligned* for both compliance and state requirement issues.

An important component related to the researchers was the element of program feedback that took the form of three elements: *Program feedback from focus groups* – was reported as important to the university to assure that the program was meeting the current needs of school districts. Often, this was collected via IHE coordination meetings and from input from local school superintendents.

*Feedback from student surveys* – was important to programs as they check on student perceptions of the curricula, course offerings, and experiences checking for the student's perspective of relevance and real-life applicability as well as the student's perceptions regarding being prepared to become an administrator. *Faculty feedback on teaching experiences per course* – was important for curricular revisions and updates and to keep the courses relevant to Millennial virtual learners.

The researchers were interested in any potential gaps that may have developed between traditional face-to-face programs and the development and adoption of online programs. To identify any gaps the researchers used the following prompt in the interview process:

*What gaps, if any, may exist between fully online and face-to-face school leadership program data in candidate competencies? What program changes, if any, have your program faculty implemented to improve these data?*

Faculty and administrators from all ten institutions reported that *relatively few, if any, gaps were identified or noticed* in the conversion of the face-to-face programs to the online programs. The content and the experiences of the courses remained constant as delivered to the candidates in either format. An interesting comment provided by seven respondents was that in some ways, online programs require the complete participation of all students. In traditional face-to-face courses many professors have had the experience that a few students would tend to dominate class conversations, and students who had not prepared for the class (readings and assigned work) would also try to “hide” by sitting in the back of class. In an online environment, all students are required to submit their own work/posting, as well as respond to others in the class. This was definitely a positive element to the online format.

The researchers found the *students' desire to take fully online programs is positive*, and that *students' desire to take face-to-face courses and programs is dwindling*. This finding indicates, that for iPrincipals, the iY generation and Millennials, technologically delivered instruction is a facet of their lives that they are very much accustomed to and are very comfortable with, if not prefer.

Another aspect related by the candidates themselves is that online programs allow them the freedom to pursue administrative credentials in an asynchronous environment that provides the candidate with a format that maintains personal and family commitments and connections and does not require “marathon days.” In contrast, previous generations, such as the Baby-Boomers, administrators, had to complete professional responsibilities in a full-time work-day and work-week, fight traffic to get to a university or satellite center to take a three to four hour course twice a week often eating fast food in the car, and then driving home exhausted to try and

rest to start all over again the next day. Often, in this former era, family obligations were sacrificed in order to complete an administrative program. While some candidates continue to take fully face-to-face courses, rather than fully online, due to the mode of delivery offered by their institutions of choice, today's generation may have an advantage being able to take online programs without having to miss their families and activities.

Eight faculty and administrators reported that the *interactions between students and institutions is better over time* as the IHEs *continue to learn and adjust* the online programs. It was reported that a key goal was to strengthen the connection between the online professor and the online students. Methods to accomplish this occurred via the use of professor profiles posted in the course, using introductory videos by the professor, and using some synchronous classes and/or connections through methods such as Adobe connect and Google hangouts for more personal interaction.

The *applied nature of programs is positive for learning* as recorded in the perceptions, beliefs, experiences, and opinions of the professors. Two elements reported by EDL faculty are:

*“The accessibility of online programs where students from literally all over the world can be involved in the course has provided a much broader perspective regarding the discussion of issues and problems from the student’s perspectives. The convenience factor for both students and faculty being able to access and administer the course on their own schedules is highly valued.”*

Professors shared that the largest perceived change *for faculty is the “difference” in the delivery modes [face-to-face to the new online program] without sacrificing the rigor of the program*. Some respondents reported that some initial concerns supported the possibility of the loss of course rigor when a traditional face-to-face program moves to an online format. However, upon the conversion of the program, most of these concerns regarding rigor have dissipated based upon the results of the online program and the candidates' success in obtaining administrative positions upon completion.

A strong concern was voiced that *online writing centers are a big need*. Writing skills of the candidates have always been important in graduate programs, but even more so in the online delivery format. Respondents reported a concern and desire for online writing centers where candidates can get additional help in their writing abilities and assignments.

## **Where do we Go From Here?**

### **Best Practices in Online EDL Programs**

The researchers used the following prompt in the interview process regarding best practices: *What are you doing well? What are some of the best practices you have discovered?*

Participants reported one best practice as the *ability to make online experiences similar to on-ground courses and to emulate face-to-face connections with professors and classmates*. This situation, sometimes referred to as “reducing the transactional distance,” was accomplished via enhanced communication that could occur through some synchronous classes, “chat sessions,” Facetime and Skype communications, as well as the traditional phone call. Even as little as one face-to-face meeting seemed to really enhance the connection between student-professor, and when possible, among students in cohort groups. It was clearly shared that the stronger the communication elements were, positive effects of student retention were noted.

All faculty and administrators also noted their online programs were successful at *developing well-prepared school leaders*. Perceptions were based on the success of graduates



who had entered the educational administration field and were being successful in their positions. Some of these candidates would return to the university to pursue doctoral programs and share opinions that the candidate's administrative credential program had given the new administrator a strong foundation upon which to enter the field.

Another best practice was reported for the use of *capstone projects*. The professors shared that these authentic experiences provided a depth of experience for the candidates giving them some insight regarding the development of resolution of problems and issues in the real-world.

The respondents also shared that the *flexibility of program models for students* is something that is going well. Some universities have multiple formats for students to choose from that include the traditional face-to-face model, hybrid [a combination of some online and some face-to-face courses], and a fully online model. Having multiple options for students to select from and customize to the candidates needs seems to allow more access for potential candidates to become involved with the program.

Two best practices espoused by the professors were the *development and encouragement of online cohorts that are collaborative across the members* and the use of *peer projects*. Each of the participants in this research felt that a strong cohort of online students that worked collaboratively throughout the program and on peer projects together helped create a bond among the candidates. This bond was helpful in completing the work, assignments, and fieldwork, and for emotional support to "hang in there" to complete the program when requirements became challenging for the candidates.

*Consistency in course delivery for all courses*, was also reported as a best practice. Eight of the ten programs included in the study had been using the online model for a period of time and the opinions of the professors was that the online method had a strong consistency since the course materials and shells used in the program were for the most part identical between semesters and instructors. Another best practice was reported as the *tightened "package" approach for content across programs*. Respondents indicated that in programs where students have the options of face-to-face, hybrid, or fully online, all options were strongly aligned and offered the same content and package regardless of the delivery option selected by students.

### **Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

As a follow-up to Azusa Pacific University's 2013 EDL faculty report, which noted the constructs their fully online program espouses to meet the needs of their iY and Millennial candidates, this study reports empirical responses of faculty and administrators across ten fully online EDL programs. Respondents provided insights to eight research questions around their innovative designs, strategies, technologies, and course deliveries. It is thought, by these EDL program faculty and administrators, the online EDL programs they deliver, and continue to assess using best practices, are evolving in their effectiveness to develop *iPrincipals* (Marcos & Loose, 2014) for 21<sup>st</sup> century school leadership.

Peter Drucker noted, "No institution can survive if it needs geniuses or supermen to manage it. It must be organized to get along under a leadership of average human beings" (n.d.). As the nature of school leadership itself has changed, from a traditional model of a single "superhero" making all the decisions (Elmore, 2000; Reeves, 2006; Spillane, 2004; 2005; 2006), to one of a more *distributed model*, (McBeth, 2008) the cohort delivery model of online EDL programs holds great capacity to engage the participation of every member. No more can

candidates ‘not show up for classes’ or ‘sit in the back and not participate,’ as every member contributes. Faculty and administrators, interviewed within this study, reported positional leaders have gone by the wayside. They noted, in their training of *iPrincipals*, they deliver programs that develop the skills of school leaders to have the perseverance to put each child first and to create a combined wisdom of all stakeholders for the betterment of students (Kolbe, 2004). These leaders are necessary as they bring their strengths and expertise to multiple leadership roles.

When asked, *What recommendations do you make to EDL faculty for the effective design and delivery of fully online EDL programs?* participants provided several recommendations to the researchers. Some of these recommendations overlap some of the earlier concepts of this study so detailed explanations will not be provided for those items, but these items will be included in the list to ensure that all pertinent recommendations are included.

1. *Have a strong infrastructure to accommodate growth.* The respondents shared that in some instances there were some “growing pains” experienced as the online programs grew in popularity with candidates and the university was not prepared for the larger number of students regarding the appropriate technology support. Additionally, having instructors trained, ready and available to deliver courses, seemed problematic for some universities. Having the ability to quickly expand the program rapidly based on student desire is important.
2. *Plan well, and there is a definite need for full-time faculty and staff.* Taking the time to plan the program well for both initial development and course revisions is critical to assure program quality, content, and alignment with required state standards and accreditation agencies. The temptation to hire large numbers of adjuncts as a cost containment measure by universities should be resisted. A cadre of long-term, full-time faculty members overseeing the program for continuity is important to address quality of the program and for developing long-term contacts with candidates, school districts, state agencies, and accrediting associations. This is not possible when there are few full-time faculty members who have been involved in the history and development of the program and also have been involved with the transition of the face-to-face to online programs.
3. *Conduct and hold district partner meetings to encourage growth.* Interview comments stressed the importance of holding partner meetings at both the university and at local school districts. The purposes of these meetings is to develop relationships and linkages to support and ease the ability for candidates to enroll in the programs, and for the university to hear directly what the current administrative needs of what the districts are. This process leads to growth in the university program via additional enrollments, as well as growth in the content of the program as unmet needs of the school districts can be considered as growth of the universities program’s content of courses.
4. *Use videos (for instructor introductions) in each course.* This recommendation was made to address concerns for connections between professors and students in an online environment to reduce “transactional distance.”
5. *Have strong orientation/induction courses.* Participants felt it was very important to have a strong orientation and induction course as the candidates entered the program. This recommendation was made to help ensure that students taking a program primarily online clearly understand the expectations, requirements, and standards of the university in order to successfully graduate. In some instances, it was related that some students encountered

problems when these items were not clearly identified and communicated at the beginning of the program.

6. *Use a cohort model to connect students.* Detailed information regarding this item is presented above.
7. *Do some synchronous activities for students.* Detailed information regarding this item is presented above.
8. *Alignment of mission, online program, standards.* Interview findings stressed the importance of assurance of the alignment of the university's mission, the online program, as well as the university, state, and accreditation standards. Some problems were related when some of these items were not in alignment. The recommendation encouraged that a university undertake a substantive self-review to check that all of these elements were truly aligned.
9. *Use social media for recognition of people.* Participants' findings were that the use of social media was considered a "requirement" of Millennials, iY, and *iPrincipals*. Using social media helped celebrate successes of the graduates, kept the university and candidates in contact, and was also helpful in recruiting new candidates.
10. *Engage course designers (instructional designers).* As the university needs to develop, design, modify, and transition courses from traditional face-to-face to the online format, it is important for the university to actively seek and engage course designers beyond the full-time faculty. Although adjunct professors are good sources in the support of course development, universities need to go further to seek out content and subject matter experts in the latest developments in the field that affect course content and class offerings (for example, the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) areas in California). Suggested possible sources for these instructional designers included employees of state agencies, auxiliary educational support private entities, and related professional educational associations.
11. *Listen to your clientele (superintendents and candidates).* Professors restated the importance for universities to clearly and closely listen to their local constituents.

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