

Doc @ Distance: A New Kind of Education for a New Century

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Introduction

Many mid-career professionals in agriculture need advanced degrees in agricultural education but are constrained by time, place, and their daily schedules from pursuing a traditional on-campus resident-credit graduate program. This innovative new doctoral degree uniquely addresses this problem.

Texas has a major investment in agriculture. As a complex system, agriculture and natural resources is a \$255 billion enterprise in Texas and accounts for approximately 17% of the Texas workforce. These systems increasingly rely on science and technology and are moving with the rest of the economy from a capital-intensive model to a knowledge-intensive model. Effective strategies for knowledge acquisition, management, and distribution are essential for success in a global economy. Megatrends, including population growth, environmental degradation, and rapidly advancing electronic and biological technologies, are changing the roles of agricultural education. Texas A&M University and Texas Tech University are recognized as major universities in agricultural science and technology and have the capacity to enhance the economic well-being and quality of life of the citizens of Texas.

Methodology

Since 1997, faculty from both Texas A&M University and Texas Tech University have met monthly via video conferencing technology and quarterly in face-to-face meetings held at various hotels and conference facilities throughout Texas. Proposals developed through these meetings were submitted to the Kellogg Foundation, which provided funds for the development of more complete plans that were then submitted to the respective college committees. Once approved by the two colleges, the joint proposals were submitted for approval to the University Graduate Curriculum Committee and Board of Regents at each University. Once approved by the respective Universities, a single joint proposal was submitted to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

Students are admitted to the new degree program through the existing processes of both institutions. All applicants must meet the minimum entrance requirements of Texas A&M University and Texas Tech University. The Ed.D. requires sixty-four semester credits above the master's degree in the following category areas: Seminars (6 hrs); Content

Specialization (21 hrs); Methods of Research (12 hrs); Supporting Field (13 hrs); and the Record of Study/Dissertation (12 hrs).

A needs analysis identified more than 100 persons who would benefit from this program. Senior administrators at Texas A&M University and Texas Tech University nominated more than 80 candidates for the first cohort, and more people have applied as the program has been communicated more widely. Current resources allow 25 students to be admitted to the program as a cohort once every four years. These candidates will progress through, and complete the program, as a group.

Using new delivery strategies, students will complete a doctoral degree while utilizing the latest advancements in educational technology. Courses are taught using WebCT, interactive videoconferencing using both Internet (H.323) videoconferencing and the Trans-Texas Video Network (TTVN), and a variety of other appropriate methods such as face-to-face meetings held on the campuses of the universities and at central locations including hotels and conference facilities.

Results

The Joint Doctor of Education in Agricultural Education degree was recommended by the Boards of Regents of both Texas A&M University and Texas Tech University and approved by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) in May 2000. Marshall Hill, speaking for the THECB, was especially complimentary of the proposal and said that it would be used as a model for the approval of any other distance delivered degree programs in Texas.

After program approval by the THECB, the joint graduate faculty began accepting applications for the inaugural cohort class, which began Fall 2000. Currently, 20 students have completed the on-line admissions process, been accepted into the program, admitted to graduate school, and enrolled at both universities.

Both departments secured additional resources to assist with this program. The W. K. Kellogg Foundation provided \$50,000 for the planning and implementation phase of this collaborative doctoral degree program. Both universities have provided significant resources to assist with the program's development. The four-year budget approved for the program exceeds \$2 million. New faculty positions have been approved and filled at both institutions to support the program. Additional resources, including support staff and equipment, will also be allocated to this effort.

The approved doctoral degree at a distance in agricultural education program (<http://doc-at-a-distance.tamu.edu>) provides specialized curriculum designed for agricultural professionals in Texas in a high-quality learning environment that encourages discovery, integration, and application. The program captures expertise from two nationally recognized universities in agricultural education. It will allow these agricultural professionals to gain knowledge and develop the skills and attitudes necessary to advance in their current positions or accept new positions of leadership in the field of agriculture.