

Series Summary

Distributed Education: Summary of a Six-Part Series



American Council on Education
Center for Policy Analysis



Distributed Education: Challenges, Choices, and a New Environment

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Foreword

This report, *Distributed Education: Summary of a Six-Part Series*, consists of an executive summary of each of the six monographs on distributed education commissioned by the American Council on Education (ACE) and EDUCAUSE.

This publication provides readers a brief overview of each of the six invited papers, which cover a variety of topics related to distributed education: the contemporary context of distributed education, self-regulation, the importance of institutional leadership, student learning, partnerships, and major challenges to the growth of distance education. The purpose of the executive summaries is to give campus leaders a shortened version of each monograph in an easy to read format. This paper, and the series that culminates with it, exemplifies one of ACE's key strategic priorities: to provide higher education leaders with timely information as we support them in their efforts to serve students and society.

The genesis of this series evolved from a design meeting held at ACE in spring 1999. Extensive discussion and exploration of major issues led to a partnership with EDUCAUSE and a close working relationship with its president, Brian L. Hawkins, and vice president, Carole A. Barone.

This series, *Distributed Education: Challenges, Choices, and a New Environment*, has been sustained with generous support from the AT&T Foundation, Accenture, and Hewlett-Packard Company.

“Distance” or “distributed” learning raises a strategic and financial challenge for every type of higher education institution. Advancements in technology and expansion of markets for distributed learning pose questions for college and university presidents, regardless of their institutional mission. Our goal in this series is to provide presidents, provosts, and other senior decision makers with a sense of the landscape of technologically mediated education and the means to make wise strategic choices.

Michael A. Baer
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Distributed Education and Its Challenges: An Overview

By Diana G. Oblinger, Carole A. Barone, and Brian L. Hawkins

Defining Distributed Education and Its Relevance for Campus Leaders

Distributed education—the delivery of postsecondary education degrees, programs, and courses—is independent of fixed time and place, and delivers course content online to distant, commuting, and residential students alike. (Note: It is important to draw the distinction that distance learning is a subset of distributed education; the two terms should not be used interchangeably.) Because electronic learning environments challenge assumptions about how colleges and universities educate students and deliver services, college and university leaders need to ask the right questions in order to choose the most appropriate strategies for distributed education. This paper provides an overview of issues that the other papers in the series cover in greater detail.

Aligning Distributed Education with Institutional Goals

Campus leaders should clearly articulate the objectives of distributed learning, ensuring that they align with overall institutional goals and resources. The prime institutional motivations driving distributed education are:

- Expanding access.
- Easing enrollment capacity constraints.
- Catalyzing institutional transformation.
- Generating revenue.

Determining Target Audience

An institution needs to know whom it could serve through distributed education. Typical student segments include:

- Traditional 18- to 22-year-old learners.
- Adult learners who receive education through a corporate employer.
- Adult learners who are seeking education to enhance their careers.
- Adult learners who are completing a degree.
- Adult learners who are engaged in education for self-fulfillment or recreation.
- Learners seeking remediation or preparing for tests.
- Pre-college learners.

Differences in learning styles, lifestyles, aptitudes, and motivations among these groups imply that each will likely require radically different pedagogies, curricula, services, and marketing strategies.

Devising an Organizational and Governance Structure for Distributed Education

Distributed education calls for a blend of technology, entrepreneurship, capital, and marketing. Successful distributed learning ventures may require organizational and governance structures different from those of traditional colleges and universities. Institutions must be capable of (1) responding quickly to change, (2) investing significant new money, (3) recruiting talented technical and instructional design staff and faculty members comfortable with distributed learning technologies, and (4) aligning their e-learning efforts with the culture of the rest of the institution.

Possible approaches to organizing distributed education include:

- Adapting traditional college governance practices.
- Establishing not-for-profit entities separate from the university.
- Creating for-profit subsidiaries.
- Launching virtual universities.

One key to success is agreeing beforehand on who makes what decisions and who is accountable for results. Clarity about organization and governance speeds processes, reduces divisiveness, and improves chances for success.

Measuring and Ensuring Quality in Distributed Education

Determining and enforcing quality standards is as controversial and elusive for distributed education as it is for higher education in general. Most existing definitions of quality are based on an environment in which institutions have a physical presence. Both academic and student services may need new metrics to assess the quality of distributed learning programs. The needs of students enrolled in distance learning programs carry implications for existing library, academic advising, career counseling, financial aid, registration, and other operations. Although it is unclear whether distributed learning students need the same services as on-campus students, what is clear is that institutions must give online students the level and quality of services necessary to meet their needs.

Reshaping Policies and Practices in a Distributed Education Environment

Many current policies and practices, designed for site-based education and print-on-paper resources, may be inappropriate or insufficient in an online environment. For example:

- Intellectual property law raises issues of patent, copyright, and software infringement, as well as issues of institutional trademark.
- Fair use doctrine suggests that using materials exempt from copyright law in the classroom may be unlawful online.
- Institutions may need to modify faculty policies on workload, class size, and compensation.
- Students who are low-income, less well-prepared, or who have disabilities may need guaranteed access to appropriate technologies, services, and financial assistance.
- The U.S. government may need to amend certain existing policies that prohibit federal aid to students in many distance learning programs.
- State regulation and regional accreditation policies may require change.

Identifying and Overcoming Barriers to Distributed Education

Many barriers to distributed education arise from resistance to change; others represent serious academic and financial concerns. For example, faculty members—fearing that a college education may lose its personal touch or even that they may lose their jobs—may be ill disposed to buy in. Financing distributed education is expensive, even when a digital infrastructure already exists, and often requires up-front capital expenditures. Competitive salaries for technology professionals represent a large ongoing expense. Distributed learning challenges institutions to look not only at new ways of doing what they have always done, but also at doing new things. The process by which constituencies are involved in this transformation will likely determine its outcome.

Facing the Challenges of Leadership

Distributed learning presents many challenges to presidents, chancellors, board members, legislators, and other higher education leaders and decision makers. One such challenge for leaders is finding the time to understand the subject in sufficient detail to fulfill their leadership roles.

Other challenges include:

- Involving a wide range of interested individuals in crafting institutional strategy.
- Expending the time and political capital required to develop a working consensus on strategy and tactics.
- Maintaining balance among constituencies on a potentially polarizing issue.
- Formulating and communicating a consistent message about institutional commitment to distributed education.
- Managing the cultural change that distributed education inevitably entails.

Equally as inevitable, distributed education will play a significant role in the future of higher education. With careful planning, judicious choices, and resolute execution, that future can be a positive one for colleges and universities as well as for the students and communities they serve.

About the Authors

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Maintaining the Delicate Balance: Distance Learning, Higher Education Accreditation, and the Politics of Self-Regulation

By Judith S. Eaton

The rise of distance learning—the electronic delivery of higher education degrees, programs, courses, and services—poses challenges to maintaining the delicate balance between accreditation to assure quality in higher education and the availability of federal money to colleges and universities. This delicate balance rests on government’s acceptance of accreditation as a reliable affirmation of quality. If higher education is to maintain its independence from government regulation, the values, policies, practices, and judgments of accreditors need to change to accommodate new models of teaching and learning, new job descriptions for faculty, new types of higher education providers, and the new measures of quality that distributed education creates.

Assuring Academic Quality in a Distance Learning Setting

Distance learning requires accreditors to review programs that routinely involve three key components not found in traditional learning settings:

1. *Computer-mediated classrooms*, where teachers and students interact with one another electronically through the written word rather than face-to-face.
2. *Separation in time* between communications and activities.
3. *Online services* such as advising, counseling, and access to research resources.

The values, policies, and practices of accrediting organizations also are challenged by fundamental changes in attributes characteristic of traditional higher education institutions. For example, distance learning is likely to

1. alter traditional faculty roles by diminishing face-to-face time with students, by separating curriculum design from curriculum delivery, and by shifting the responsibility for determining academic standards away from the faculty;
2. replace or augment lecture halls and classrooms with cyberspace networks and chat rooms, leaving institutions with no anchor in space and time; and
3. transform a college degree from attesting to the culmination of a distinctive, institutionally based experience to signifying the completion of an idiosyncratic amalgam of self-selected educational experiences.

To assure quality in distance learning, whether in traditional settings or in new ones, accreditors need to identify the distinctive features of distance learning delivery; modify quality guidelines, policies, or standards so that they are appropriate to distance learning environments; and pay additional attention to student achievement and learning outcomes.

Assuring Continued Government Confidence in Accreditation and Self-Regulation

Government needs to be assured that federal student financial aid will continue to purchase a quality educational experience. In a distance learning environment, institutions, accreditors, and government officials need to work together in grappling with several key tensions involved in assuring educational quality:

- **Defining a course.** Distance learning increases the number of courses that are not part of the curriculum, do not carry credit, and do not lead to a degree.
- **Measuring time.** Evidence of time spent studying and in class has traditionally been required to allow students to receive federal student aid. Distance learning environments may call for “time” to be defined in additional ways.
- **Documenting student learning outcomes.** Traditionally, faculty have used grades to describe student achievement. Distance learning emphasizes competencies as well as grades as a standard for satisfactory performance.
- **Changing student attendance patterns.** The traditional single-institution attendance model is yielding to patterns characterized by students earning degrees at more than one institution.

The federal government has published two reports—*Report to Congress on the Distance Education Demonstration Program* (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) and *The Power of the Internet for Learning* (Web-Based Education Commission, 2000)—that frame questions needing attention if the political understandings between higher education and government are to be preserved. Both reports indicate that maintaining the delicate balance between student aid availability and accreditation will require changes in light of the changes engendered by distance learning.

Protecting Students Through Expanded Public Information About Quality

With 70 percent of high school graduates enrolling in postsecondary education, public interest in what a college education is worth in return for what it costs demands more and better public information about institutional quality. The public increasingly holds accreditors as well as providers accountable for supplying this information.

Colleges and universities need to:

- Share more detailed information about institutional performance.
- Use student achievement more extensively in judgments about institutional performance and quality.

Accreditors need to:

- Expand the information they provide students and the public.
- Make their descriptions about what accreditation assures and what it does not assure more explicit.
- Strengthen communication about quality between accreditors and those who undertake alternative forms of external quality review of education and training (e.g., certification boards).

Distance Learning and International Quality Assurance

Effective management of international quality assurance likely will be required of accreditors as part of maintaining the delicate balance. Today's discussions of international quality assurance cannot take place without attention to distance learning. Issues such as managing the import/export of distance learning offerings and the mobility of students enrolled in distance learning are but a few of the topics receiving attention in higher education and accreditation.

About the Author

Judith S. Eaton is president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), a private, nonprofit national organization that coordinates accreditation in the United States. CHEA represents more than 3,000 colleges and universities and 60 national, regional, and specialized accreditors.

Distributed Learning: New Challenges and Opportunities for Institutional Leadership

By John C. Hitt and Joel L. Hartman

Distributed Learning as Leadership Challenge

The web is dramatically changing college and university life. Its capabilities are ideal for education and collaboration: It supports both synchronous and asynchronous delivery of education, integrates multiple Internet functions (e-mail, file transfer, hypermedia) and formats (text, graphics, video, sound), and is interactive and communal.

Traditionally, extension services and continuing education departments managed distance learning programs. Today's programs—serving both on- and off-campus students and using sophisticated course development, support, and delivery systems—require a breadth of expertise and a depth of campus involvement that calls for both vision and leadership. In order to make technology work for all students and faculty, the president must lead the campus in shaping a comprehensive technology agenda to achieve institutional goals for student learning, productivity, and cost effectiveness.

Distributed Learning as Institutional Commitment

The magnitude of institutional commitment called for by distributed education requires that it align closely with the institution's strategic goals. Campus leaders need to consider distributed learning in light of three basic strategic imperatives:

- **Access.** Because its delivery does not require students to be in one place at one time, distributed education suits the lifestyles of busy students and thus is more accessible to more people. And because technology may increase efficiency and productivity, institutions may be able to serve more students, also increasing access. But technology also may be a barrier to access for some low-income students or students with disabilities.
- **Quality.** Research has shown that distributed learning may yield improved student learning outcomes. Institutions must set and promulgate quality standards for distributed learning and continually assess student performance against those standards. Several leading organizations have developed standards, guidelines, and measures of commonly accepted best practices against which institutions may evaluate their distributed learning programs.
- **Cost.** Although early studies suggest that colleges and universities can achieve substantial cost reductions by moving to a distributed learning model, the savings are not immediate. In fact, the upfront investment in the hardware, software, and specialized technical personnel that make a large-scale program work is very large. Campus leaders need to evaluate such an investment in terms of the institution's mission and in terms of the likelihood of improved student learning.

Leadership Style

Committing to a large-scale distributed learning agenda involves dramatic change for an institution and its constituents. Such transformational change can occur only when leaders shape and articulate a clear vision, focus resources on implementing it, and bring campus-wide collaboration to the task of realizing it.

Leaders of such change need to be:

- Internally engaged.
- Inclined to use their position to move the agenda forward.
- Able to act opportunistically and aggressively when situations arise that are favorable to the agenda.
- Ready to engage in technology-related strategies and decision making.
- Aware that change is disruptive but can be made safe by strong, active leadership.

An Action Agenda for Leadership

College and university leaders need to implement an action agenda to effect the transformation of their institutions to distributed learning. The following agenda items describe—from a presidential perspective—the requisite conditions to support and manage this transformation:

- Establish a shared institutional vision for distributed education.
- Clearly articulate and communicate this vision and its goals.
- Integrate technology into the strategic plan, the budget plan, and the organizational structure of the institution.
- Understand and “own,” not delegate, technology decisions.
- Ensure that other institutional leaders share responsibility for understanding and participating in the technology agenda.
- Create a task-oriented, collaborative internal leadership team to get the job done.

Support Systems for Effective Implementation

To sustain a successful distributed learning initiative, institutional leaders must ensure that people have the tools and support systems to facilitate change.

- **Faculty and Course Development Support.** Distributed education challenges many basic faculty assumptions about teaching and learning. Faculty are accustomed to being solely responsible for course content and presentation. In a distributed learning environment, an institution will need to assemble teams of instructional designers, digital media specialists, programmers, and software engineers to assist faculty in designing and delivering courses.
- **Infrastructure.** Developing online courses will require more servers and specialized software. Institutions will need to update their existing technology infrastructure to handle the special demands of reliability, availability, and performance that this primary teaching and learning medium entails.
- **Learner Support Services.** Critical to success in distributed learning (and key to emerging accreditation requirements) is online, 24/7 student access to library and bookstore resources, advising, financial aid, registration, help lines, course-specific support, and other services.
- **Institutional Policies and Practices.** Distributed education raises questions about faculty roles and rewards that institutional policies must address. Similarly, changes in the way courses are designed and delivered raise complicated copyright and intellectual property issues. The faculty needs to be fully engaged in developing policies and practices that are consistent with the institution's governance model and culture.
- **Assessment of Program Effectiveness.** Beyond demonstrating that distributed education produces a high level of student learning, assessment should drive process improvement and policy development in all facets of distributed learning.

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Student Learning as Academic Currency

By Sally M. Johnstone, Peter Ewell, and Karen Paulson

Defining Academic Currency in an Era of Distributed Education

For at least a century, the credit hour has served as the standard unit of academic currency. A college degree has certified that a student spent a prescribed time satisfactorily completing a series of courses comprising a given number of credit hours. Distributed education—with its emphasis on asynchronous, nonsite-specific, self-paced learning—compels campus leaders to consider new ways to measure student achievement. To remain relevant, the current system of measuring the worth of a college education needs to change if it is to respond to the realities of higher education in the 21st century.

Awarding Credentials to the Web Generation

Even before the “web generation” reached college age, about half of all college students took some of their classes from more than one institution. Four years ago (the most recent year for which statistics are available), 58 percent of undergraduate degree recipients had attended more than one institution and 19 percent had attended three or more. This phenomenon, termed “swirling,” is sure to intensify, as on-campus students expect not only high-speed Internet access and web-friendly courses, but also access to other institutions’ courses to satisfy their educational needs. With most higher education institutions now offering distributed education, more than 2.25 million U.S. college and university students—both on campus and off—are studying online. At the same time, many states are creating multi-institutional consortia to avoid duplication of investment in technology-driven curricula. So, as students swirl and institutions work together to serve them, one institution’s faculty, or one individual faculty member, no longer directly guides a student’s educational experience. As a result, new ways of awarding credentials need to evolve.

Recognizing Shortcomings of Current Certification Measures

In this new environment, the system of faculty-awarded grades for credits contains at least three major deficiencies.

- **Grades fail to represent outcomes of multiple learning experiences.** Although grades recognize the exposure to discrete blocks of content and a degree represents the satisfactory completion of a multiyear course of study, the traditional currencies fall short in pinpointing a student's command of abstract abilities such as writing, critical thinking, and quantitative reasoning.
- **Lack of consensual achievement criteria undermines the validity of grades and credit hours.** This raises doubt about the legitimacy of these traditional currencies because grades are ill defined in terms of what they are certifying and because credit hours, in themselves, fail to account for learning.
- **Inconsistency of faculty judgments weakens the reliability of grades.** Because individual instructors award grades, students often receive different grades for the same level of performance—a circumstance that generates widespread distrust among external stakeholders.

Adopting an Achievement-Based, Portable, and Credible Academic Currency

Since comprehensive reform of the faculty grading system is not likely to surface any time soon, higher education needs to fashion a new unit of academic currency—modeled on long-established licensing practices in professional and technical fields—that is, achievement-based, portable currency that commands wide credibility and recognition. Although many academics greet this certification approach with derision, transferable credentials based on demonstrated achievement are already well established in the form of advanced placement exams, course-equivalent exams, and experience-based credit awards.

Key characteristics of a seamless, portable, achievement-based system of academic certification include:

- Reliable assessment based on outcomes or competencies.
- Early, regular assessment to determine gaps in required abilities.
- Opportunities and awards for learning beyond traditional, formal coursework.
- Third-party verification of achievement.
- Ready acceptability of credentials to all stakeholders.
- Prominent educational role for individual mentors or advisors.
- Acceptance of multiple delivery modes.
- The simplicity, flexibility, and credibility of the credit hour system.

Rethinking and Revising Academic Currency Policies

Making student learning the basis of a new academic currency—moving from time-based to achievement-based descriptions of learning—will require specific accounts of what students should know and be able to do (competencies) and specific ways to determine levels of student knowledge and achievement (assessments). Such a shift also will obligate higher education institutions, state and system leaders, federal policy makers, and accreditation agencies to rethink the ways in which they interact with one another and with students and to revise the guidelines for those interactions.

- Faculty members and other institutional leaders will need to (1) redesign curricula, such that a program is defined by a set of student learning outcomes rather than a collection of courses, (2) adapt teaching and learning activities to a competencies-and-assessments structure, (3) change the roles of faculty members and redefine use of faculty time, and (4) alter the faculty reward structure.
- States and systems first will have to establish a compelling vision for learning as academic currency and then implement financing mechanisms, reward structures, and student transfer processes that consistently support the vision.
- Federal policy makers will need to modify laws and regulations to permit financial assistance to students in distributed education programs.
- Accreditors will have to modify their standards and review methods to place more emphasis on defined learning outcomes as a measure of quality, whatever the method of instructional delivery.

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Partnerships in Distributed Education

By Richard N. Katz, with Elizabeth M. Ferrara and Ian S. Napier

Defining Partnership

A partnership is any relationship between independent organizations created to achieve mutually beneficial goals. Partnerships allow organizations to share risk, take advantage of one another's strengths and expertise, pool resources, and spark creativity. Given the complexities of a large-scale distributed education program, few institutions will make significant enrollment gains by going it alone. But colleges and universities can realize the potential value of partnerships only if these partnerships are organized and managed for success. Because a distributed education initiative is risky and relatively untried, the mitigation of financial risk and the synergy of creativity serve as powerful inducements to partnering.

Partnership Models

Partnership success requires that each partner articulate clearly defined objectives and understand what forces are driving it to enter the field. In general, an institution should consider a distributed education program for three broad reasons:

- **Program Quality and/or Cost Reduction:** To renew or expand core academic programs for existing students, or to change the programs' cost structure.
- **Access:** To offer current academic programs to additional students.
- **Growth and Academic Innovation:** To create new programs to serve new students.

Partnerships in distributed education fall along a continuum of seven arrangements.

1. A university system enables institutions within a single governance entity to join one another, thus allowing students easy access to an expanded course catalog.
2. Bilateral arrangements join two separate institutions with shared academic purposes or student populations.
3. Single-state government consortia are initiated by public bodies to expand access, promote economic development, and/or reduce costs.
4. Multilateral content syndication consortia of college, university, and corporate programs combine course offerings to create a virtual university.
5. Multi-institutional alliances jointly deliver content online to fill academic gaps, reduce costs, and/or develop new markets.
6. For-profit/nonprofit alliances enable a university to provide content and credentials to a for-profit entity.
7. Prime contractor agreements range from a buyer-supplier relationship to full partnership.

Choosing a Partner

Selecting a partner and a partnership model begins when an institution defines its own objectives (what it wants) and identifies gaps in its capacity (what it needs) to undertake a distributed education program. A comprehensive gap analysis will consider the current capacities of the institution and of a potential partner to perform in the following areas (among others): assessment, credentialing, accreditation, branding, customer relations, technology infrastructure, content development and delivery, student services, skill and professional development, and student access to scholarly materials. Two key elements in assessing these capacities are the uniqueness and frequency of the activity at the institution.

Why Partnerships Fail

At least half of all mergers and acquisitions fail, so failure in educational partnerships is not unexpected. Analysis reveals a number of characteristics common to failed enterprises, among them:

- Loss of a dynamic leader.
- Disagreement over the distribution of returns or losses.
- Inadequate financial due diligence in assessing a potential partner.
- Clash of organizational cultures, or of leadership vision and style between organization heads.
- Inadequate technology infrastructure.
- Failure to integrate operations effectively.
- Shifts in strategic direction by one or both partners.
- Failed communication, which hurts staff morale and retention.

Because failed partnerships are common, it is essential that both potential partners use due diligence in examining themselves and their collaborator before embarking on the enterprise. Cultural differences and compatibility of decision-making styles demand particular attention.

Principles of Successful Partnering

Six essential principles govern a successful partnership:

1. The partnership is a top priority for all parties involved.
2. Speed in decision making and action is a value for all parties involved.
3. The partnership agreement captures the genuine consensus of the partners and serves as a touchstone for all decisions and actions.
4. Personnel are well prepared and fully engaged in the partnership.
5. Decisions are customer- and employee-centered.
6. Integration of operations aligns with partnership expectations and motivations.

In order to avoid stumbling blocks to a successful distributed education partnership, partners must carefully manage the following areas of organizational effectiveness:

- Alignment of partners' visions, objectives, and expectations.
- Mutual understanding of partners' risk tolerance.
- Governance and role definition.
- Ownership of intellectual property.
- Liability for errors and omissions.
- Stakeholder expectations.
- Leadership style and roles.
- Speed of growth.
- Independent stability and viability of partners.
- Explicit documentation of financial goals, reporting, and accountability.
- Communication.
- Branding strategy.
- Cultural attitude to change.
- Contingency (dissolution) planning.

[About the Authors](#)

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Barriers to Distance Education

By Arthur Levine and Jeffrey C. Sun

Barriers to distance learning exist both inside and outside the higher education community, but some obstacles serve to create standards and ensure high quality, while others often act unintentionally to bar change. The challenge for higher education is to preserve the former and eliminate the latter.

Internal Barriers to Distance Education

The ideal of American higher education has long been teaching and learning in a close relationship between student and teacher. Some in higher education believe that this vision directly conflicts with distance learning; this perception is a primary barrier to the development of distance education. Internal barriers to distance education include pedagogy, internal governance and external competition, and money.

Pedagogy

There is no pedagogy for distance learning. Although the promise is a highly interactive medium of learning that institutions can customize to meet the individual needs of students, the talking head remains the predominant mode of instruction today, and current forms of distance learning often prove to be poor imitations. Faculty members are unfamiliar with the interactive and individualized nature of distance education, uncertain about their own roles, and concerned about not only their students' well-being but also their own careers. Distance learning is more labor intensive for faculty because of the new levels of 24/7 service it demands.

Internal Governance and External Competition

Governance in higher education, although highly democratic, moves at glacial speed. Distance learning is proceeding at a pace more congenial to for-profit entities. In addition, for-profit companies find higher education appealing because it generates large, dependable revenues, its market is growing and global, its enrollment is counter-cyclical, and it is subsidized by federal and state governments.

Higher education brings three fragile assets to the competition: (1) branding (history and reputation), (2) intellectual capital and content (faculty and courses), and (3) the ability to offer credits and degrees—any of which private enterprises may easily co-opt. Colleges and universities may need to decide quickly what role, if any, they wish to play, so time itself becomes a barrier to distance learning.

Money

With federal and state aid likely to decline, and with colleges facing lower revenues and higher costs, the equipment, staffing, and marketing expenses of starting a distance learning program represent formidable hurdles for most colleges and universities. The higher failure rate of well-publicized and expensive efforts at distance learning within the academy is yet another bar.

External Barriers to Distance Education

External barriers to distance learning include federal financial aid, issues of access for persons with disabilities, intellectual property and copyright law, varying state regulations, accrediting agencies, and professional organizations and unions.

Federal Financial Aid

Federal laws and regulations regarding student aid are too rigid and inhibit the expansion of distance learning. Designed to prevent fraud and abuse, prohibitive regulations—such as the “50 percent rule” barring federal aid at institutions offering more than half their courses via telecommunications or enrolling more than half their students through technologically mediated devices—set up obstacles to nontraditional education.

Issues of Access for Persons with Disabilities

Although distance learning holds great promise for many of the 54 million Americans with disabilities, access barriers may exist if institutions do not construct courses that work with students’ adaptive technology or, in some cases, that can provide adequate accommodations when the institution cannot provide the necessary auxiliary aids and services.

Intellectual Property and Copyright Law

The longstanding practice of allowing faculty to own their lecture notes and classroom presentations may become yet another stumbling block to distance education. Both faculty and institutions fear losing ownership of these valuable works. In particular, each has an interest in the potential revenue source, control and dissemination of the work, and attribution of the scholarship.

Copyright law poses the additional complication of how properly to use copyrighted material in online learning settings. Higher education benefits from two exemptions: (1) the “performance or display” provision, which applies only to nonprofit institutions and may not apply to Internet transmissions, and (2) the “fair use” exemption, which permits partial reproduction of a copyrighted work used for teaching, scholarship, criticism, news reporting, and so forth, regardless of medium. Without liberal interpretations or revisions of the law, copyright restrictions present formidable barriers.

Varying State Regulations

Because regulating education falls primarily to individual states, the rules imposed on distance education vary considerably. Although states rightly oversee the quality of education, the future of distance learning is threatened if it must operate under the different standards of 50 regulatory systems. Furthermore, public institutions have to contend with inadequate funding for existing programs, making the high start-up costs of distance programs even more daunting.

Accrediting Agencies

Accrediting agencies created policies and practices with the traditional, in-person educational experience in mind. This approach does not adequately evaluate distance learning programs and creates two major barriers: (1) a lack of clear, applicable guidelines for evaluation, and (2) inconsistencies in the standards that do exist.

Professional Organizations and Unions

Finally, higher education organizations and teachers' unions have been divided, for various reasons, in their response to the growth of distance learning. Some critics often cite the dangers of diminished quality control, loss of academic freedom, mass production of education, and inefficient cost shifting. One response to these challenges has been the development of consortia and partnerships, which—though not without their own hurdles—may minimize risk, harness synergies, and avoid wholesale disruption of traditional learning paradigms.

About the Authors

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