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Some Questions About Distance Learning and the Role of the University

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One can easily argue that the world of higher education is a microcosm of today's larger society. While colleges and universities have traditionally been organized around what some suggest are the rather ethereal pursuits of learning, teaching, and research, today's campuses are increasing being challenged by the same intense, substantial and practical social issues that are present in the more broadly defined world that exists outside of their boundaries. Matters of social justice, gender equity, economic pressure, internationalization and rapid and continual technologically-driven change are among the many concerns that are now impacting the academic decision making process. Questions of how to best serve new learners, learners who are of increasingly pluralistic social and racial backgrounds, learners who more often than not are women or part-time students with full-time multiple social roles and responsibilities and who have increasingly sophisticated expectations of educational delivery systems, abound. Clearly, the conundrum of how to balance the role of the traditional university with the demands of an ever changing educational consumer cohort and marketplace continues to pose a fundamental challenge to campus leaders. For a large number of institutions, the broadly defined concept of distance learning has been seen as one way to address the needs and demands of these new learners in the years ahead. However, while the move toward increasingly mediated learning activities has become an ever more common practice today, many basic questions concerning the effectiveness and viability of such initiatives remain unanswered.

Is Profit Enough?

Traditionally, discussions of profitability of the higher education enterprise have been somewhat rare among college and university faculty members. Life in the non-profit world of higher education has allowed many to avoid having to examine profit and loss calculations, ignore return-on-investment and cost-benefit analyses and focus upon matters in which surplus revenue, making a profit, is of minimal concern. Generally, academic units are not viewed as auxiliary enterprises or profit centers, like the campus bookstore, the university food service, or increasingly, the licensing rights of university logos and apparel, in which the ultimate accountability measure is to make more money than is spent.

Rather, the most desirable annual end state of an academic budget has been to show neither a surplus nor a deficit. Continuing institutional support of key academic departments rarely relies upon

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achieving increasingly substantial revenue goals. Yet it is clear that this environment is changing and in many instances the medium that is being used to reach these new models of institutional profitability are distance learning-based programs aimed at the ever growing number of adult students in higher education today. Goldstein and Lozier (1998) have estimated that for-profit institutions of higher education are "now a $3.5 billion-a-year business and are growing at 10 percent a year" (p.51). In the current edition of *Peterson's Guide to Distance Learning Programs,* (1999) some 850 accredited colleges and universities in North America which offer distance learning programs are described. In a companion work, Phillips and Yager (1998) describe "190 professional and career credential programs" (p.7) that are offered on a distance learning basis. The Apollo Group, the corporate entity which operates the University of Phoenix, reported a profit of $21.4 million in 1996 on a net revenue of $214 million while enrolling 47,000 students. (Chronicle of Higher Education, 1997). Given these data, it is easy to understand why more traditional colleges and universities, motivated by the lure of substantial enrollment increases and profitability, are moving toward a distance-based delivery system. In a related commentary, Margolis (1997), has suggested that "Market capitalism, not the Internet, is the force behind developing the wired university. A college degree from an accredited program will suffice– the cheaper the better– as long as it increases a chance of a student's chance of securing a decent job to help pay back his or her loans. The "high tech" universities of the next century will be hailed as yet another triumph of the free market" (p.1).

Considering the basic nature and purpose of America's system of higher education, it is questionable whether the motive of enhancing institutional profitability is a sufficient rationale for entering the distance learning marketplace. If so, it would seem that our universities become no more or less than educational e-GM's (the General Motors new e-commerce initiative) (Gardner,1999) or Wal-Marts, which try to underprice our competitors with new and inexpensive lines of somewhat unrelated merchandise. Yet for many small and large colleges and universities alike, distance learning activities that are aimed at the increasing market of degree hungry adult students are being viewed as the means to save floundering academic programs, assure the continuance of continuing education units with marginal academic affiliations with the campus at large or generate additional revenue in lean economic times. For some, the argument is simply one of the marketplace driving the delivery mechanism... i.e. "All of our competitors have distance learning programs... we must get into the business or we will be losing large numbers of students and missing the opportunity to generate a substantial amount of new revenue". Clearly, the basic and somewhat fallacious assumption that action equals effectiveness and presence in the market place naturally yields increased student participation should clearly be more carefully examined before institutional budgets are forced to accommodate new, cost-intensive distance delivery systems with no known history of fiscal viability or academic success. Instead, maybe it is the advancement of knowledge and the provision of relevant learning experiences which improve practice in all sorts of societal venues that should be the basis upon which the decision to enter or not to enter the distance learning arena is made. We may well find that the for-profit business model now so commonly being applied to distance learning initiatives is one which, rather than improving access to meaningful learning opportunities, actually imposes accountability measures that are contextually inappropriate

to the university campus and cause decisions to be made which are fundamentally antithetical to the core mission and values of the institution.

Is Distance Learning Effective?

Evaluating distance learning initiatives is an issue that receives at best only a modest amount of discussion in the literature or among campus faculty members and administrators. Advocates of distance learning are fond of saying that students in such programs tend to like them about as much as face to face instruction. Post-class reaction forms seem to show little difference in student ratings, leading to the conclusion that both mediums are at least equally enjoyable. Considering all that is known about the process of assessment and evaluation and the substantial number of distance learning programs that are now in place in this country, where are the data which actually show that students learn more, learn faster, retain more information, perform better on the job, or are more competent citizens, parents or employees as a result of distance learning coursework? I once advanced this argument to one of my graduate students whose response was exceedingly interesting. She was a clinically-based, senior level, health educator who had received a substantial amount of her professional preparation via distance education programs. Her advocacy of distance learning was clear and strong. Without a moment's hesitation she said, "Well we don't apply those type of evaluative measures to other types of educational programs... lecture led, small group instruction and the like. Why should we apply them to distance learning programs?"... the one bad practice gives worth to other bad practices argument. In some small way perhaps she had a point. Certainly, evaluation is a process that can always be improved. However, in the case of distance learning, as opposed to other forms of instruction, sponsoring organizations are currently investing millions of new dollars, building new campus infrastructures and making substantial ongoing annual investments in technology to support distance learning initiatives. Clearly a more rigorous approach to examining the success of the fundamental alteration of the ethos of higher education that is being posed by aggressive distance learning programs would seem to be merited. If the best we can say is that distance learning initiatives are equal in "enjoyability" to existing programming, where is the benefit to the organization and more particularly to the learners in engaging in such a new and expensive practice? Phillips and Yager (1998) in attempting to counter this argument, have pointed to the research of Russell who "reviewed 248 reports and studies on the effectiveness of distance learning" which concluded that there are "no significant differences in learning when traditional face-to-face methods are compared to distance delivery means (p.7)". Finding no significant difference does not seem to be the type of substantial evidence to which one would point in order to support expansion of distance learning initiatives. Rather, given these data, ultimately does not the question become why invest more resources to get at best the same results? Likewise, while some may argue that the overall objective may be to spend less to get the same results, there appears to be little evidence that distance learning initiatives reduce the cost of instruction, especially when the imbedded costs associated with implementing an institution-wide comprehensive approach to distance delivered coursework are considered.

Kirkpatrick (1998) has argued that evaluation is a multi-stage process that involves more than just eliciting immediate post-class reactions of students. He has suggested that issues of learning, behavior and results must be examined if we are to truly understand the effectiveness of educational initiatives. Given this model, the basic evaluative questions about distance learning concern knowing more than just whether or not students like the medium or that there are no significant differences present when comparisons to traditional instructional methods are made. Rather, it seems that knowing if learning occurs and if so, to what extent and degree it occurs as a result of distance learning programs in relationship to other educational interventions, would be important. It would seem equally important to have knowledge of whether the behaviors of learners change in a positive and useful way after participating in distance-delivered educational programs. Finally, and most significantly, it seems that being able to know that distance learning activities foster the occurrence of positive individual outcomes or organization results would be a key piece of information to have in determining how, and if, to proceed with any alternative distance-based delivery medium.

What About Faculty Development?

There is an old truism that faculty members often teach as they were taught. The models that are seen in the formative portions of a person's educational life and career are often those upon which future actions are based. To the extent that this is true, faculty members in institutions that are being driven to a high level of distance learning programming face a increasing challenging situation. Generally in such circumstances there are no personal models of professional practice, successful or otherwise, for faculty to draw upon when entering the world of distance learning. Conducting lecture led classroom instruction provides little if any preparation for faculty members to prepare a web-based course, develop a CD or translate traditionally delivered coursework to a real time televised medium. For many faculty members, teaching is at best a second order activity that occurs behind the initiation of an individual research agenda. In some ways these research-oriented faculty members are being doubly penalized when trying to deal with distance based models. Their experience is usually one in which their employment is based on subject matter expertise and research competence. They are rewarded for generating external support for their research initiatives and expanding their publication record. Consequently, they often have no professional preparation in even the basic art and science of teaching. Yet now, with the move by many colleges and universities to distance-based instruction, these very same very capable scholars and scientists are being required to become technology-based instructional design specialists and distance oriented teaching faculty members. The intellectual vacuousness of this practice is astounding. No one would ask an attorney, a physician, or an accountant to undertake such a fundamental transformation of his or her individual practice. Yet today, faculty members in many of the nation's 3300 colleges and universities are facing just such a dilemma. Perhaps the time has come to truly begin to institute meaningful and comprehensive faculty development programs that are designed to prepare college and university faculty members to enter the new world brought about by distance learning programming. It may also well be time to reconsider the nature of faculty workloads and compensation as related to the development and translation of traditional courses to mediated formats. Standards used by many training organizations suggest that there is a ratio of somewhere between 50-300 hours of development time to one hour of instructional delivery time. The

impact upon the responsibilities and activities of faculty members of such a development to delivery time equation is staggering even when examined just in the light of one traditional, 3 credit hour, 45 clock hour course. How often are such development initiatives a part of the calculation of routine faculty work loads? Likewise, how will the on-going time-intensive activities associated with the continuing support of such coursework be determined and factored into faculty workloads? How frequently are blocks of development time built into faculty job responsibilities and considered as part of advancement in rank, tenure and compensation decisions? Moreover, even if release time is awarded for development and support activities, how are issues of course coverage and student supervision going to be funded in the absence from the classroom of faculty members engaged in distance learning related development initiatives?

How Is Learner Access Assured?

Given the high profile of the internet, e-commerce and the ever more visible www.com environment of the late 1990's, one could easily assume that access to the world of electronic information and computers is universal. Unlike the case with television, in which some census data show that nearly 98 per cent of American households have one or more sets in the home, access to computers and the internet is relatively limited in the United States and almost unheard of in many nations around the world. In some countries, many people have never seen, much less even used, a telephone. T1 lines, web sites, and even e-mail are mysterious and unknown commodities to many adults. Sadly, the assumption that the ability to access electronically-based learning is a phenomena available to all is an erroneous, yet often made one. Clearly, this is simply not the case in both many portions of rural America and the nation's urban centers. Perhaps as the drive to more and more electronic learning accelerates, thought should be given to the notion as to whether these initiatives are truly beneficial to the advancement of society or instead are actually creating an ever widening gap between the "haves" and the "have nots". Historically, trend data have shown that the more education one has, the more he/she seeks to participate in ongoing learning initiatives... the educationally rich get richer syndrome. Conversely, and consistently, it seems that the educationally poor continue to get poorer. By some estimates illiteracy is at an all time high in the United States and the inability to read effects 7 out of 10 of the world's citizens. Rather than just continuing to invest in technology, hardware, software and fiber optics, our society would be better served in investing in "peopleware". It is easy to become enraptured by the lure of technology and the desire to have the capability to deliver products and services in a bigger, faster and more profitable manner. Unfortunately, it is equally easy to leave the less fortunate, the less well to do, the less educated behind in the drive for technological sophistication and advancement. Certainly in such a period of educational plenty as this nation is now experiencing, it is now time to reexamine the ethical dilemmas posed by driving learning opportunities toward an end that may well cause more people to be disenfranchised than are brought into the electrified learning society of the 21st century.

"The Future Isn't What It Used to Be."

In thinking about how institutions of higher education can best enter the new century and reshape our campuses in ways that can best serve learners of all types, one of my favorite sayings from Yogi Berra comes to mind. He once said, in commenting on changes and new directions in his life, "The future isn't what it used to be." In many ways the future of the distance learning enterprise on college and university is not what it used to be either. For many, distance learning was initially seen as being merely another educational tool to use in reaching time or place-bound students, no more, no less. Instruction was facilitated by distance-based technology. Like many other innovative educational strategies that have taken place over time such as evening colleges, correspondence study, off-campus programs and degree opportunities, distance learning was viewed as just another step in the evolution of the modern college campus. Unfortunately now, in many situations, distance learning is seen and being sold as being the new "cash cow", the great profit center, and on some campuses the savior, of today's and tomorrow's universities. Perhaps, rather than continuing to charge blindly into a Yogi-like unknown future, now is the appropriate time for college and university faculty members and administrators to jointly step back and re-examine and redefine the fundamental purposes of and rationale for entering the distance learning marketplace. Adoption of a more thoughtful approach to determining the place of distance-based learning in the university may well yield surprising and useful results. Conversely, to do less and leave the questions of the place of profitability, the effectiveness of the medium, the role of distance learning in faculty workload and developmental activities and the fundamental matter of access unanswered, will result in our campuses and more importantly our students being essentially ill served by the current, continuing, institutional headlong rush to engage in any form of distance learning-based initiatives.

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