

Going the Distance

Powerful forces, both intellectual and financial, are moving higher education in the direction of increasing reliance on information technology. In the coming decades, we will develop a large variety of new techniques and partnerships, new delivery mechanisms and consortia of providers.

Anyone who still needs to be convinced of how exciting the prospects are for IT in the immediate future should become familiar with some of the many successful experiments in distance learning. Networking within and beyond the classroom allows us to transform the face of higher education

by extending access, overcoming physical and logistical constraints, and putting powerful tools for collaboration and analysis directly into the hands of students.

One of the sources of this excitement about distance learning, and also of the challenges that lie ahead, is the fact that we are in an age of exploration: the landscape is still largely uncharted. We would do well to consider carefully what seeds we plant in this brave new

vices that can be used to good effect in supporting other parts of our endeavor—can be sought and sometimes attained through these investments. But our chief criterion in thinking about how we invest our scarce time, energy, and resources should always be: which innovations will most clearly benefit those who ask us to provide an education for them?

As an industry, we are convinced that smart investments in technology can help us improve access to higher education itself, to make a quantum leap into new communities and disciplines. Since one of the major fruits of the new technology is opening new markets, thus attracting new students, we also need to ask whether different demographics will characterize those students and how we should provide the optimal product and service mix. At the same time, venturing into online education is an extension of decisions we have always made about launching a new school or degree program, decisions that are usually preceded by a careful, calculating assessment of market demand and risk.

The new world of instructional technology is highly competitive; institutions are scrambling to be the first to offer a particular kind of degree online or to develop new venues for their educational products. They assume, after considering shrewd historical evidence, that being first in the field, establishing a reputation as the obvious provider, can bring considerable benefit. No doubt this is as true in educational technology as it is in the marketing of VCRs or Jell-O. But as has

also proved to be the case, being on the “bleeding edge” carries peculiar risks, as well as the formidable costs of start-ups and initial investments. The barriers to entry are substantial, and requirements include much more than the ability to design a great Web site.

Fortunately, there is good evidence that the pie is growing bigger as formal education becomes increasingly understood as a lifelong process. People retire earlier and live longer, and they take more courses and degrees as they grow older. In our knowledge-based society, where the financial as well as the psychological benefits of higher education are becoming clearer all the time, more and more young people and their families are regarding higher education as a necessity. Happily, therefore, those who are not “first through the door” will not find all doors closed to them.

Duke University, like many other institutions, has used distance education responsibly and to good effect to bring together widely scattered audiences: executive MBA students on different continents; working nurses in rural hospitals in underserved counties in North Carolina. We hope to keep our eye on the fundamentals for which there is no substitute. In cases where we decide that distance learning technology clearly helps provide educational opportunities to new groups of people, and also fosters teacher-student and student-student interaction, we’re ready to “go the distance.” When our impassioned intention to serve students and our cold-hearted business case converge, we move forward.

Nonetheless, the pressures on universities and colleges sometimes skew choices in how and whether to enter the distance learning arena. It ought to sober us that, as Robert Zemsky put it, some “institutions distort their purpose in the pursuit of new student markets, developing new programs more in the hope of revenue enhancement than from any deeper conviction about the contribution these programs would make to an institution’s educational offerings.”¹

And there are certainly experts

making hyperbolic statements about what these new technologies can provide—demonstrating thereby a lack of understanding of what high-quality education is all about: the importance of context, of close collaboration, of responsiveness and feedback and personal relationships, of place as well as cyberspace. A thirty-five-year old e-business executive recently announced an online university that he says will offer an education of Ivy League quality to anyone in the world for free.² If you look more closely at what he has in mind, you see that he proposes to make available, online, free lectures by celebrities or would-be celebrities about their fields of expertise. This is not an unattractive idea, although one suspects that he has drastically overestimated the desire of most folks to do this gratis; it is also too bad that he has mislabeled his charitable product from the outset.

We need to approach distance education, as we should all exotic and complex new opportunities, with great mindfulness and with our mission statements before us. This is one of the most exciting ventures that higher education has ever undertaken, and we are fortunate to be part of this new world. We have a very special opportunity to invest to enhance learning, improve access, and perhaps even help to heal the digital divide. Let’s do so in partnership, with each other and with our suppliers and our students, in keeping with sound business principles, since these investments are not cheap, but with the eye always on the main prize: a better education for more students, everywhere in the world.

Notes

1. [Robert Zemsky], “The Third Imperative,” *Policy Perspectives* (University of Pennsylvania Knight Higher Education Collaborative) 9, no. 1 (November 1999): 6.
2. Cindy Loose, “Billionaire to Give \$100 Million for Free Online University,” *Washington Post*, March 15, 2000, A13. The business executive is Michael Saylor.

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