

The Death of Distance Learning?

Despite rumors of its demise, distance learning has become a vital part of our teaching strategy

By **Fred Hurst**

Distance learning increasingly has come under attack in the past year. The National Education Association asserted that distance learning always costs more than traditional on-campus courses. An American Federation of Teachers and National Education Association-sponsored report questioned the validity of distance learning efficacy studies. A report that warned that distance education could disadvantage those without access to computers was released by the College Board. The American Association of University Professors wrote a letter criticizing the recent accreditation of Jones International University, an entirely online virtual university. At the same time, a study released by International Data Corporation (IDC) indicates that distance learning will grow by 33 percent each year for the next five years, with an estimated 2.2 million students in 2002. Why is distance learning under attack when student demand for it is increasing?

Distance learning isn't dying. Rather, it's moving from a peripheral and almost experimental existence to become a central part of our institutions' teaching mission. The terms distance education and distance learning don't adequately describe the range of courses often included under their banner. It's not a question of the traditional course versus a distance learning course, but a continuum of technology use from the blackboard to the computer. We're just beginning to under-

stand and use these newer tools to enhance the teaching and learning process. They won't supplant traditional classroom methods.

These new tools will provide a range of options for students to learn, taking into account their learning preferences and time or location restrictions. Faculty will use these tools to support the teaching and learning process in the traditional classroom, in courses delivered entirely using technology, and for

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everything in between. We will abandon the terms distance education and distance learning in favor of new terms that better describe the pedagogy and technologies used.

Changing Demands

The use of computers to assist the learning process isn't always distance learning. Clearly, a course that meets on campus and uses e-mail to enhance communication is a traditional class, and a course that never meets on campus is distance learning. As you look at a continuum from the Carnegie and accrediting standard 45-hour seat-time

course to a zero-hour seat-time course, it becomes clear that the division between distance learning and on-campus courses must be somewhat arbitrary. For example, is a course delivered primarily on the Web but having three Saturday on-campus sessions distance learning? Does it make a difference if the students live and work distant from the campus or are on-campus residential students? Increasingly, institutions recognize the arbitrariness of these divisions and have begun to abandon the distance learning classification.

Students, whether traditional college age or adults returning to school, will be increasingly computer literate. A February 2001 Harris Interactive survey, for example, indicated that more than 50 percent of homes in the United States are online. Demands to integrate computer use into the curriculum will continue to increase, and the potential market for Internet-based or enhanced higher education is growing in leaps and bounds. The College Board concerns about computer-delivered distance learning limiting access will decline as more of our potential students have computers. Today, students can use financial aid to buy computers.

Distance learning courses suit some students' learning styles particularly well. For these students, mediated courses, with their inherent characteristics of letting students learn at their own pace and review content until they completely understand the subject matter, are the preferred learning

paradigm. Large institutions may offer two sections of the same course, one in the traditional classroom setting and another using distance learning technologies. In this case, students decide which option best suits their needs. For a student who cannot come to campus, the mediated course may be the only option, but for a student taking courses on campus, the options increase. Better yet, learning may be enhanced and retention increased.

Shifting Definitions

Over the past few years, a number of changes in distance education indicate a shift in our viewpoints. The terminology has changed from distance education to distance learning for a number of reasons. Education is faculty and institution centered. In higher education we educate. Learning is student centered. Many students learn with or without the help of our faculty and support staffs. Ideally, we facilitate their learning — part of the value added for the tuition we charge.

Early distance education efforts were interactive, bringing students and faculty together at the same time but in different places (synchronous), or they weren't interactive at all, as in correspondence courses and taped video telecourses. Distance learning, as now practiced, often uses technology to let students and faculty interact at all hours (asynchronous) at their convenience, as in the case of Internet, e-mail, and Web-based or Web-supported classes. Many believe that we will increasingly need to provide education to students on their terms, coining the phrase student-controlled learning.

The related terminology reveals an emerging trend — we've moved from calling mediated courses distance learning to calling them distributed learning. Distance education provided access to students who could not or would not come to our campuses. The entrepreneurial staff running distance learning programs could safely tap a largely unserved market, one that didn't threaten to reduce the number of students coming to campus.

With synchronous distance educa-

Table 1

Distributed Learning at NAU

Here at Northern Arizona University (NAU) we've aggressively developed a distributed learning program consisting of more than 30 degree programs, with 900 courses offered and more than 4,700 students enrolled each semester. We've moved from no courses on the Web to 130 Web-based courses in just three years, with almost 1,700 students enrolled this spring. We broadcast educational programming, including NAU courses, 24 hours a day via our Universityhouse channel on the Dish Network into more than 3.4 million homes across the country. NAU chose distributed learning as one way to serve a growing student population of busy adults who need flexible learning to complete their degrees and certificates in a shorter time frame.

tion, location controlled the possible market. The technology was expensive and place-bound, in locations like businesses and other institutions. The technologies used — satellite and compressed video teleconferencing, for example — required specially equipped rooms, often dedicated to that use. With asynchronous Web-based courses, anyone with a computer and Internet access can take a class. With the broader use of Internet and Web-based distance learning courses especially, on-campus students soon asked to take distance learning courses — and wouldn't take "no" for an answer.

At most campuses around the country, about 75 percent of the students enrolled in Web-based courses each term are also enrolled in traditional on-campus classes. The classes no longer primarily serve students at a dis-

tance, hence the growing use of the terms mediated and distributed learning to describe them. Distance is a relative term — there's more distance between the faculty member and the students in a large lecture hall than between a distance learning student and faculty member who are a mouse click apart online.

From Peripheral to Central

Traditionally, distance education was often a peripheral activity on our campuses, run by entrepreneurs, often in continuing education or through a dedicated distance learning organization. As institutions recognize that distance learning is vital to the mission of teaching and learning, reorganization moves distance learning activities from the periphery to the center of the institution, either as a centralized function or decentralized in the colleges and departments.

Many administrators and faculty resist the changes that distance learning brings in the culture, values, and traditions of the academy. Students who cannot or will not come to campus to receive instruction won't come to receive academic support. Testing, evaluation, mentoring, office hours — all are examples of faculty roles that need rethinking. Still, the shift of distance learning activities from the periphery to the center of our institutions indicates that many of our faculty and staff recognize that higher education is changing. This process of change will be difficult because it isn't a simple process of integrating new methods into our existing structure. It requires substantive and in many cases fundamental changes in how we develop and deliver courses, and administer student support services.

One outgrowth of these changes is the development of virtual universities and electronic campuses. Some are more virtual than others, ranging from those that provide only the courses to full-service organizations that provide high-quality student services either within or outside the institutions, facilitate the delivery of courses, and, in a few cases, award degrees.

The few institutions offering only distance learning courses, often called single-mode providers, will help change higher education. Their challenge is to serve their students better than the dual-mode institutions that serve students on and off campus at the same time. They need to be more convenient, flexible, supportive, and visible, in addition to having the highest quality learning experiences. In their pursuit of students, they will challenge our traditional institutions to improve offerings and services to stay competitive.

Responding to Changing Needs

A final trend is the increasing demand by public policy makers and the general public for higher education to be more responsive to their perceived needs. After more than a decade of substantive increases in tuition and

fees, the general public wants to know where their tax and tuition dollars go. They expect more convenience, more productivity, and the same or better quality educational opportunities.

Public policy makers listen to the public and echo their demands in terms of accountability measures, increased regulation, and greater intrusion into the management of our public higher education institutions. The public and the policy makers believe that technology-supported education can respond to their needs, but worry that distance learning has become a code name for requesting new funding.

Clearly, distance learning isn't dying — it's being assimilated into our institutions in something approaching a metamorphosis. This isn't merely semantics. The change is more complex than adopting a new term such as distributed learning and discarding the old term distance

learning. I believe that in a few years we won't talk about distance or distributed learning. Instead, technologies will contribute to the mix of tools and methods we use to support learning, on campus and off. I think we've entered that period where we stop talking about distance and start using the knowledge the distance learning movement has provided to serve all our students.

The recent reports critical of distance learning are indicators of change in the academy. The assimilation of distance learning will change our institutions in ways that will make us all uncomfortable. Nonetheless, in many cases these changes provide challenges that will reinvigorate our teaching, research, and service roles. *e*

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