

The Convergence of Distance & Conventional Education: Trends in Higher Learning

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INTRODUCTION

As higher education institutions pursue flexible and blended learning formats through multimedia technologies, the gap between traditional and distance learning is slowly merging. Today, there is a paradigm shift occurring in higher education as most colleges and universities around the world are moving away from using a single-mode of teaching and learning toward integrating a dual-mode system of higher education. This paper provides an overview of that shift and explains the various trends blurring the boundaries between distance and conventional education. Through an analysis supported by recent literature and research in the field of distance education, it discusses issues around convergence and summarizes the advantages and foreseeable challenges it presents in higher education.

ANALYSIS

The proliferation of information and communication technologies has significantly impacted the direction of higher learning. Studies conclude that technology will continue to transform campus-based institutions as they “reconstruct their infrastructure, redesign policy and realign external relationships to gain competitive advantage in the information superhighway environment” (Bates, 2000, p. 7). According to various surveys performed by the U.S.

Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics, there is "an increasing number of campus based institutions across all sectors of higher learning that are using the power of the internet and multimedia to provide students with access, support, teaching & learning transactions, research and course materials" (Thomson, Ganzglass, & Simon, 2000, p. 26). The boundaries between distance and conventional institutions are blurring because the boundaries between time and space are being eliminated.

I. The Key Forces of Change: Trends Effecting Higher Learning

a) New Learner Profile & Learning Markets

The profile of a higher education student today is dramatically different than it was several years ago. The percentage of adults, females and minority students are growing as many students are shopping for courses and programs that meet their schedules and circumstances. Some factors influencing this phenomenon include "the growth of lifelong learning, economic necessity, the rapidly changing job market, changes in the economy and the simple aging of student populations" (Howell, Williams & Lindsay, 2003, para. 11). Due to these changes, most colleges and universities are offering flexible learning programs because they better serve students who are holding full or part-time job, family commitments, and multiple responsibilities. Research indicates that most students are "interested in qualifications from smaller modules and shorter programs and in learning that can be done at home and fitted around work, family, and social obligations" (Bates, 2000, p. 10). They are demanding integrated learning solutions, including value-added services such as needs assessment, customized curriculum design, online mentoring and performance

support. More and more campus-based institutions are expected to create better learning connections between support services, performance skills and performance initiatives while integrating digital technologies to increase flexibility and access to better reach new learning markets (Dunn, 2000)

b) Lifelong Learning & Workplace Training

In today's information society knowledge doubles every four years and the "typical student will need to take at least 30 semester credits every 10 years" (Howell, William & Lindsay, 2003, para. 26). Lifelong learning is competitively necessary for both the higher education institutions to reach new markets and also for the student to gain new knowledge in the workplace. The need to develop flexible learning programs parallels with the "changing nature of the workforce as it requires a continuous cycle of retraining and retooling" (Howell et al., para. 36). Bate's (2000) contends that "most individuals will be required to retrain at least five times in a working lifetime and learners will need to customize curriculum to fulfill professional certification or job security" (p. 14). "By the year 2025, 95% of instruction in the US will be digitally enhanced for greater "portability" making consumers of students and putting them in the position to shop for the best deal" (Dunn, 2000, para. 11).

c) Student Enrollment & Infrastructure Challenges:

College enrollment is expected to grow at a rate of "16% over the next ten years but the current higher education infrastructure cannot accommodate the growing college age population and enrollments" (Howell, Williams and Lindsay, 2003 para. 6). Predictions from the Association of Governing Boards

state that as a result “the number of traditional campuses in the next ten years will decline with a third of today’s existing independent colleges & universities either closing, merging or significantly altering in mission” (Thompson, Ganzglass, & Simon, 2000, p. 29). In many circumstances “distance education models will provide the solution to capacity constraints that growing enrollments place on current higher education infrastructures” (Dunn, 2000, para. 15).

d) Increased Competition & Partnerships

The changes in the institutional landscape will lead to more competition in the educational market as new educational providers, corporate universities and mega universities emerge (Dunn, 2000). Today, there are more “publishers, corporations, for-profits and nonprofit entities entering into the business to sell and award credits directly to the end user and through intermediation, bypass the institutional middleman” (Dunn, 2000, para. 8). The influx of new leaders entering the marketplace has traditional institutions creating partnerships to share technology and to produce and deliver courses (Howell, William, & Lindsay, 2003). This growing market is leading to new collaborative ventures between universities, publishers and multimedia companies where “the universities provide the “brand name,” intellectual property, pedagogy, credentials and credibility, and the companies offer the business and marketing expertise, technology and opportunities to profit from” (Latchem and Hanna, 2001, p. 10). As a result, the distinction between public and private

universities, for profit and nonprofit institutions, and distance and local education is largely disappearing” (Howell, et al., para. 25).

e) Budget Cuts, Funding Implications & Educational Standards:

Today, higher educational institutions are required to maintain standards deemed necessary to operate effectively while dealing with limited resources. Most traditional institutions are faced with “the rise of operating costs, the rise of development costs, the necessary enlargement of infrastructure capacity, and lower endowment payouts because of weak financial markets” (Howell, Williams, & Lindsay, 2003, para. 39). As traditional institutions experience funding challenges and limited resources, distance education rises up to meet the challenge these institutions cannot. It is expected that over the next several years there will be a “33 % growth rate in distance education with up to 1/3 of all traditional programs available [alternatively or exclusively] online” (Howell, et at., para. 40).

f) Innovative Technologies & The Global University:

The advancement of technology makes it possible to deliver learning to students of all nationalities, age groups and socioeconomic levels. And with the increase of Internet usage, delivery systems are capable of reaching students who are no longer tied a geographical location. Daniel (1996) predicts that by “2025 a global university will exist, antiquating the notion of regional accreditation, tuition areas, service region, and semester hours” (p. 15). This university will consist of “a consortia of colleges, universities, and other kinds of institutions increasingly band together to produce and deliver

courses that students may receive from any part of the world, dictated more “by what learners need, than by what has been traditionally done in the past” (Dunn, 2000, para. 15). Attributes of this university will be that “accreditation, quality standards and administrative functions are applicable to every country” (Mason, 1998, p. 15).

II. Convergence: The New Face of Higher Learning.....for Better or for Worse?

The preceding analysis lists several trends influencing convergence between conventional and distance education. An overview of benefits include: the ability to expand access to educational opportunities and increase flexibility through information and communication technologies, the ability to alleviate capacity constraints, the opportunity to capitalize on emerging market opportunities, the opportunity to decrease marginal costs while increasing productivity and institutional efficiency, the ability to provide support through resource based learning including synchronous and asynchronous communication, the option to target new groups of learners, and the opportunity to remain competitive in a global marketplace (Howell, Williams, & Lindsay, 2003). However, along with the many opportunities that convergence brings, an institution must also plan for the many obstacles convergence presents when using multimedia technologies to deliver education. Challenges include: the lack of access and sufficient bandwidth capacity among users, disparities among geographic and socio-economic boundaries, the increase of the “digital divide” and a bigger gap between the “haves” and “have not's,” limited knowledge on planning for effective support or teaching strategies online, large up front expenses for hardware and software materials, as well as ongoing costs for upgrades, support and

training while maintaining limited resources, collective agreements on issues around partnerships (i.e. providing student services, setting tuition, restrictions on copyright laws, figuring out finances and compensation for faculty, and transferring credits), and the lack of support and expertise among faculty on using technology for teaching methods (Naidu, 2001). Although the research stated in this paper identifies both the benefits and challenges of using digital technologies to deliver teaching and learning, several other studies conclude that multimedia still has little or no effect on the overall learning process (Clark, 1983). Clearly, it is essential for any higher learning institution to develop a strategic plan when using multimedia to deliver instructional content and support, and also to identify how these technologies best fit in to the overall mission of the institution. There are many complexities in the transformation process but “perhaps the biggest challenge is the lack of vision or failure to use technology strategically” (Bates, 2000, p. 7).

CONCLUSION

The preceding analysis highlighted several trends influencing convergence in higher education. It discussed several factors blurring the boundaries between campus-contact and distance-based learning institutions and concluded with identifying some foreseeable outcomes and challenges as predicted by various research and literature in the field of distance education.

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