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ABSTRACT
        Distance education (DE) is no longer an option that
institutions of higher education might consider, but has become a
reality that must be intelligently constructed and managed with
dwindling resources. In California, DE has been recommended as a
solution to deal with the state's postsecondary financial crisis. As
the University of California and California State University systems
are forced to turn away more students, unenrolled students will end
up at the state's community colleges and many will be served by DE
programs. As of 1994, the California Community Colleges enrolled
93,000 students annually in DE courses, accounting for 7% of their
total enrollment. Eventually, as the numbers of students increase,
undergraduate DE at universities may eventually be required as well.
Unfortunately, the proposed programs in California are money- and
job-saving efforts designed to accommodate institutional needs and do
not address student needs, such as interaction with other students on
campus. To reduce potential student problems while implementing DE
programs, the following recommendations should be considered: (1) DE
should target upper-division students wherever possible since
research has found tha involvement in the first year of college is
extremely important for students; (2) participating in a DE program
should require a minimum grade point average; (3) the entire course
should not be taught via DE; and (4) an administrator who is aware of
research and technology should oversee the implementation of DE
programs. (TGI)

The Last of the Handcrafted Students:

Issues of Distance Education in Academia

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The Last of the Handcrafted Students:

Issues of Distance Education in Academia

The phrase "business as usual" no longer applies to academia. Higher education as we have known it for the past 250 years is being forced to undergo dramatic changes in policy and practice. One major change that will profoundly affect higher education is the expanded inclusion of distance education in colleges and universities. No longer will distance education serve only the rural and non-traditional student population, now the traditional student is being targeted as well.

This paper does not present distance education as an option that higher education has the luxury to consider. Instead, I approach distance education as a reality that must be intelligently constructed and managed. First, I will discuss what distance education is and what it entails in terms of technology. Second, I will cite reports that are shaping the future of distance education in California postsecondary education and offer a future scenario. This will be followed by a discussion of the new role of distance education and how it is at odds with much of the higher education research. Finally, I will offer recommendations on how distance education in colleges and universities can be effectively managed with the least amount of damage to students or colleges.

Distance Education and Technology

Utilizing television, computers, fax, e-mail, video tapes and other technologies, distance education allows instructors to teach students at off-campus sites, thereby reducing

the costs associated with having students physically in campus. The "Summary of Findings" from the National Survey on Distance Education Practices (1992) found that broadcast, either television or cable, was the most frequently used media in postsecondary distance education.

Other distance technologies are *synchronous* in nature, meaning the participants in the discussion or tutorial are on-line at the same time although they may be separated by distance (real-time). Examples include telephones and audio conferencing as well as real-time computer communications.

Many believe, however, that an increasingly significant role in distance learning will be played by technology offering *asynchronous* communication, that is, participants are separated in time, even if not necessarily by distance. Examples of asynchronous communication are fax machines, voice mail, electronic networks and bulletin boards, and electronic mail through computer networks. Before the year 2000 higher education will employ all these technologies in an effort to serve more students with increasingly dwindling resources. The *conceptual* change is dramatic: students will no longer have to set foot on a college campus to get a degree, in fact, they will be encouraged (if not required) to utilize distance education in their course of study.

Where distance education is concerned, the United states has long lagged behind Europe and the former USSR in terms of implementation. While we doggedly held on to the British liberal-arts model and expanded it throughout the country, our European counterparts were utilizing distance education almost as soon as the first radio was mass-produced. Some examples include:

- Northwestern Polytechnical Distance University, Leningrad (1929)

- USSR Distance University for Economics, Moscow (1930)

- British Open University (1969) (Peters, 1994)

Thus, distance education is really not such a new concept, and much European academic literature has explored the distance education phenomenon. Foremost among European researchers in this field is Otto Peters, formerly a researcher at the German Institute for Distance Education.

Peters (1994) compiled data on distance education throughout the European Community and the former USSR. One of his rather striking findings is that distance education highly mirrors *industrialization*. It is the most industrial form of teaching and learning that neatly answers the dilemma facing many administrators today: how to supply high-quality instruction at a comparatively low cost for great numbers of students. It is Peter's contention that the teachers and students involved in postsecondary education have, for the most part, been operating in a pre-industrial manner much like craftsmen taught apprentices for centuries. He sees distance education playing an intregal part in the natural evolution, the *industrialization*, of postsecondary education. Although this idea of industrializing higher education sets my teeth on edge, Peters also predicts that eventually distance education will move toward a post-industrial mode where group dynamics will be the focus of educators and students. That is, if colleges and universities can afford it.

California public postsecondary education, already reeling from increased enrollment projections amidst budget cutbacks, has a tenuous financial future. The California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC) in 1992 recommended the increased use of educational technology to deal with the state's financial crisis, suggesting that:

> This option offers the potential of accommodating larger numbers
>
> of students without expanding the number of faculty employed;
>
> the ability to provide instruction to students located in remote areas
>
> without building new campuses or educational centers; the ability
>
> to offer instruction in certain disciplinary areas without hiring new
>
> faculty; and the ability to provide instruction at any hour of the
>
> day or week (CPEC, 1992).

These sentiments were echoed by the Commission on Innovation, which in 1993 recommended that the California Community Colleges and California State Universities should have a system-wide goal of serving 20 percent of the enrollment demand through distance education by 2005. This, they reported, would save approximately $135 million per year by 2005. Without technology to reshape the curriculum, the commission predicted that colleges will face a choice between reducing the quality of education offered to all students or maintaining the present quality but educating only half as many students. They also recommended the implementation of High Technology Centers where students would learn through interacting with computers in order to increase cost effectiveness by 25 percent. In addition, they predicted increased student retention, increases in the numbers of students

served without increases in staff, and an enhanced learning environment where students could learn at their own pace.

It is no surprise that many of these reports are targeting the California Community Colleges. As the UC and CSU systems clamp down on the number of students they enroll those un-enrolled students will end up on the CCC's doorstep. Already the California Community Colleges enroll 93,000 students annually in distance education courses, accounting for 7 percent of their total enrollment (Cepeda, 1994). In an effort to expand the scope of distance education courses offered, the Office of the Chancellor of the CCC recently decided to allow non-transferable general education courses to be taught via distance education in addition to the courses transferable to a four-year institution.

Indeed, the community colleges are taking the issue of distance education seriously. In an interview with Bob Cody, Assistant Dean of Instructional Computing at Pasadena City College, I was made aware of yet another threat to the community colleges. Bob informed me that about 1 percent of the courses at PCC bring in about 85 percent of the budget. (The courses he was referring to were the transferable general education courses such as English 1A , Math 1A, etc.) Recently, for-profit proprietary schools have begun to implement distance education courses aimed at the very students that attend the general education courses at PCC. This presents a very real threat to PCC, because if they lose the general education students they also lose the revenue generated by those students---potentially 85 percent of their budget. Bob is desperately attempting to convince a reluctant PCC administration to look toward the future and begin planning distance education course offerings *now*.

The proprietary schools and purveyors of high technology know that distance education has the potential to be "big business". One of the major forces behind distance education and other technology-mediated instruction is the high technology industry itself. It is likely that their efforts will continue to influence, if not drive, the future of distance education in California as well as the rest of the country. Marketers of high technology have identified higher education as a growth market over the next two decades, and will be exerting more economic and political pressure to increase the use of technology in instruction (Halal & Leibowitz, 1994).

Unfortunately, the technologies that have the most promise are expensive. What is inexpensive is the pre-taped show where the student's only interactions with the instructor are tests and other graded assignments and the opportunity to make a telephone call to someone if a student has a question.

The Growth of Distance Education in Community Colleges

A report of the US postsecondary distance learning programs predicted that the decade of the 1990's would see phenomenal growth in distance education programs to the extent that most people in the United States will be served by at least one program (Brey, 1991). Much of this growth will take place in the community colleges, which have traditionally led the way in technology-based instruction (Douchette, 1993). As of 1994, 80 percent of community colleges in the United States offered some form of distance education program, and that number will continue to increase.

The report also contended that the majority of local distance education networks will probably be managed by community colleges and other two-year institutions by the latter half of the 1990's. Community colleges will utilize broadcast television to a greater degree than four year institutions because:

- Most telecourses provide fresnman and sophomore-level instruction;

- Community colleges serve everyone in their immediate geographical area and broadcast television can reach students easily;

- Distance education programs do not conflict with the mission statements of most two-year institutions; and

- Broadcast television is relatively inexpensive compared to other technologies.

Increased interest is being directed towards distance education programs provided by community colleges. The Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) recently announced a partnership with 60 community colleges around the United States which will enable students to earn degrees using instruction from 20 PBS stations (Halal and Leibowitz, 1994).

Higher Education in the Future

Given the reports cited above, it is reasonable to predict that distance education will become a reality to many undergraduates in the near future. Rather than attending packed lecture halls and overcrowded classrooms, students will have the option of taking their core general education courses via television. In fact, some courses in community colleges might be offered solely as distance education courses to reduce the number of students on campus.

This is a realistic scenario because the lower-division general education courses are the least expensive to produce and will affect the maximum number of students.

In an industrial sense, community colleges might begin to resemble production studios and management centers. and instructors will become more like guidance counselors or coaches in the learning process. Lower income students will be most affected by this industrialization, and those who are confounded by the technological sophistication needed to navigate the college system will be overlooked. Of course, the traditional college experience will still be offered by the private liberal arts colleges for those who can afford to attend.

Eventually. as the numbers of students increase, undergraduate distance education will be required at CSU and UC schools as well. but their programs will be less extensive compared to the community colleges. Since distance education transcends distance and time. more colleges will compete for student business, especially the proprietary schools. Undergraduate education will be looked upon less as an *experience* and more as a *product* to be sold. It is at this point that higher education, much like industrial America in the past. will begin to experience many ills such as price wars, lower quality classes, loss of the craft and skill of teaching. depersonalization, management struggles and student disillusionment.

The New Role of Distance Education

Many college administrators and state officials are looking at distance education as one way to solve the financial dilemma facing higher education. Many of the previously mentioned studies and reports on distance education cite research that paints a rosy picture of distance education as a successful. satisfactory alternative to the traditional college

classroom. The problem with those studies is that they are reporting on a non-traditional student population which is very different than the traditional students who will be affected in California.

Distance education in the United States was originally designed to accommodate the needs of the *student*. Successful distance education programs in Canada and Maine (1991) targeted working students, the disabled and homebound, and especially students who resided in rural areas. These non-traditional students were older, self-motivated, and grateful for the distance education programs offered, so retention was rarely a problem and satisfaction was high.

The oposed distance education programs in California do not focus on the student, instead the are designed to accommodate the *institution*. Specifically, distance education programs are being developed to save money and jobs in the higher education system. Rarely do any of the reports discuss how distance education programs will potentially affect the student. Instead, their concerns center around revenue, saving jobs, and providing a quality *product*.

The reality is that students will be adversely affected by distance education, some more than others. This was briefly discussed by the Executive Committee of the CCC Academic Senate which suggested the following:

> Innovation should always serve the best interests of the students.
>
> Access to inferior learning opportunities is not access to all. In
>
> particular, the effect of these high-technology solutions on at-risk
>
> students and especially students from historically underrepresented

groups, who, according to all the research, benefit from contact and

involvement with the institution and all its staff well beyond what we

offer as we currently operate. *Such students would be the victims of*

many of the technological proposals. (Report of the CCC Executive

Committee, 1992).

Research has shown that students gain enormously from being a part of a campus

(Astin, 1993). The exposure to other students and the opportunity to interact with students

and faculty from diverse backgrounds is an important aspect of the college experience as well

as the personal development of a well-rounded student. Students who are not involved in the

college community have higher rates of attrition, less satisfaction with their college

experience, and more stress. In light of this research, distance education programs will ease

some problems on the institutional level but increase problems for students. Most higher

education researchers would agree that distance education programs fly in the face of what

has been found in research, but unfortunately the plans have already been put into motion.

Recommendations

The choice to expand distance education programs and change the face of higher

education in order to survive is not an easy one for those involved in the decision-making

process. Their dilemma is this: do we keep things as they are and cut programs as well as bar

certain students from a college education, or do we make structural changes that might be

uncomfortable in order to accommodate more students and save jobs? Obviously

administrators are opting for the latter, but will th students really come out ahead?

The following are suggestions I offer that might reduce the sting of mandatory distance education programs by recognizing the results of past research:

Distance education should target upper-division students wherever possible. Research has found that the first year of college is extremely important for students in terms of involvement and socialization. These first-year students should be the ones to attend class on campus so they have a chance to get involved and meet other students. Upperclassmen--(upperclass*people*?), on the other hand, have already made these important connections and stand a better chance of surviving a distance education program without dropping out of college.

Participating in a distance education program should require a minimum GPA. Students with high GPAs tend to be high achievers who are motivated to learn. These students would be more likely to keep up with a distance education program and not lose interest. By requiring a minimum GPA, students already at risk of dropping out of college would not be placed in a situation that would potentially harm them further. The convenience of a distance education program might eventually be looked upon as a reward for having a high GPA.

Don't teach entire courses via distance education. Instead of teaching an entire section of a course via distance education, spread it out among courses. For example, have the lecture portion of the course broadcast to students once a week, but have them meet on campus in discussion groups for the remaining two classes that week. This would effectively reduce traffic on campus while providing students with contact and feedback on a regular basis.

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Put someone in charge of implementing distance education who is aware of the research, not just a technological specialist. When people think of distance education they think of technology. Naturally, the people chosen to administrate distance education programs will be those with technological sophistication. I recommend the opposite: the person in charge should have *student* sophistication and implement an intelligent program that doesn't sacrifice students for technology.

Distance education *can* be managed properly and successfully compliment a traditional college system. Unfortunately, many of the proposals I have read clearly demonstrate that administrators are not aware of the damage distance education could wreak on students, faculty, and the colleges themselves if it is not undertaken with some regard for those it is intended to serve.

This generation may well be the last of the handcrafted students. I have no doubt that my children will not attend college in the same way that I have, unless I become wealthy enough to afford a private liberal-arts college when the time comes. Distance education, the way it is currently proposed, will ultimately widen the gap between the wealthy and "the rest of us" in terms of access to quality postsecondary education.

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