

Academic, Economic, and Technological Trends Affecting Distance Education

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A number of prominent distance learning journals have established the need for administrators to be informed and prepared with strategic plans equal to foreseeable challenges. This article provides decision makers with 32 trends that affect distance learning and thus enable them to plan accordingly. The trends are organized into categories as they pertain to academics (including students and faculty), the economy, technology, and distance learning.

Recently, Beaudoin (2003) urged institutional leaders “to be informed and enlightened enough to ask fundamental questions that could well influence their institution’s future viability” (p. 1). Decision makers often rely on long-term demographic and economic projections, based on current trends and foreseeable influences, in their strategic planning (Reeve & Perlich, 2002). While identifying trends does not offer solutions to distance learning challenges, decision makers will benefit by carefully considering each trend as it affects their institution and goals.

METHODOLOGY

The trends presented in this article were identified during an integrative literature review, conducted to summarize the current state and future directions of distance education. Resources were selected based on their currency and relevance to distance education, information technology, and impact on the larger, higher education community. As themes emerged, the citations

were then ordered in sub categories and specific trends, and condensed for publication.

ACADEMIC TRENDS

Knowledge and Information are Growing Exponentially

One cannot dispute that there is a proliferation of new information: “In the past, information doubled every 10 years; now it doubles every four years” (Aslanian, 2001, p. 5; see also Finkelstein, 1996). This growth in information will certainly continue to dramatically impact higher education and learning in general.

The Institutional Landscape of Higher Education is Changing: Traditional Campuses are Declining, For-Profit Institutions are Growing, and Public and Private Institutions are Merging

Changes in institutional landscape may magnify competition among educational providers and allow new models and leaders to emerge. Currently, only 4-5% of all higher education students are enrolled with for-profit providers, but 33% of all online students are enrolled with these same providers (Gallagher, 2003). Dunn (2000) projected that by 2025, “half of today’s existing independent colleges will be closed, merged, or significantly altered in mission,” and that “the distinctions between and among public and private, for-profit and nonprofit institutions of higher education will largely disappear” (p. 37).

There is a Shift in Organizational Structure Toward Decentralization

Much of a distance education program's success or failure can be attributed to how it is organized. Hickman (2003) has observed a movement "from a highly centralized core of administrators, coordinators, [and] marketing and support staffs to a more 'institutionalized' approach in which continuing education personnel were assigned to academic units within a university" (p. 6).

Instruction is Becoming More Learner-Centered, Non-Linear, and Self-Directed

Instructional approaches are becoming more learner-centered, "recursive and non-linear, engaging, self-directed, and meaningful from the learner's perspective" (McCombs, 2000, p. 1). Whereas most instructors previously followed a "transmission" or lecture-style approach to teaching, more instructional diversity is occurring among teachers who are trying a larger variety of approaches (Eckert, 2003).

There is a Growing Emphasis on Academic Accountability

In a recent poll by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, university presidents, administrators, and faculty members rated increasing demands for accountability (80%) and expanding use of distance education (78%) as the highest impact trends on future NCA (i.e., regulatory) activities (de Alva, 2000). Distance educators must plan to accommodate this emphasis on accountability to maintain accreditation and meet consumer demands.

Academic Emphasis is Shifting from Course-Completion to Competency

Related to accountability trends, there is a slight shift from "theoretical" and "seat-based time" to "outcomes-based" or "employer-based" competency. In many cases, "certification is becoming more preferable than a degree" (Gallagher, 2003). Diplomas are less meaningful to employers; knowledge, performance, and skills

are what count to them (Callahan, 2003). With an emphasis on competency, course content will be dictated more "by what learners need, [than] by what has been traditionally done" (de Alva, 2000, p. 38).

Education is Becoming More Seamless Between High School, College, and Further Studies

As universities shift toward competency and institutions cater more closely to learners' specific needs, distinctions between educational levels will dissolve. "Incentives will be given to students and institutions to move students through at a faster rate [and] the home school movement will lead to a home-college movement" (Dunn, 2000, p. 37). As leaders in the effort to cater to learners' needs, distance education programs may be a dominant influence in this trend.

Higher Education Outsourcing and Partnerships are Increasing

Universities are traditionally independent, freestanding, and competitive (Hawkins, 2003). In contrast, distance learning institutions have been more cooperative and accommodating with partner institutions. Interestingly, Rubin (2003) has noted that "traditional universities are becoming more like distance learning universities and not the opposite" (p. 59). With this shift, more institutions are creating partnerships with other colleges, universities, and companies to share technology and to produce and deliver courses (Dunn, 2000; Carnevale, 2000a; Cheney, 2002; Primary Research Group, 2004).

Some Advocate Standardizing Content in Learning Objects

Frydenberg (2002, para 38) noted that "the central issue in courseware development at the moment is the potential for developing reusable learning objects, tagging them in a systemic way, storing them in well-designed databases, and retrieving and recombining them with other objects to create customized learning experiences for specific needs." Such customized learning, allowing for "true" individualized learning, is the future and strength of educational technology (Saba, 2003).

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