

The Sloan Consortium

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the Sloan Consortium (Sloan-C) is to help learning organizations continually improve quality, scale, and breadth according to their own distinctive missions, so that education will become a part of everyday life, accessible and affordable for anyone, anywhere, at any time, in a wide variety of disciplines. Created with funding from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, Sloan-C encourages the collaborative sharing of knowledge and effective practices to improve online education in learning effectiveness, access, affordability for learners and providers, and student and faculty satisfaction.

Sloan-C maintains a catalog of degree and certificate programs offered by a wide range of regionally accredited member institutions, consortia, and industry partners; provides speakers and consultants to help institutions learn about online methodologies; hosts conferences and workshops to help implement and improve online programs; publishes the newsletter *The Sloan-C View: Perspectives in Quality Online Education*, the peer-reviewed *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks* (JALN), and annual volumes of applied research studies; and conducts research, surveys, and forums to inform academic, government, and private-sector audiences. Sloan-C also offers services such as awards, conferences and workshops, an effective practices database, and peer-reviewed listings in the Sloan-C catalog for regionally accredited members with online degree and certificate programs.

Sloan-C generates ideas to improve products, services, and standards for the online learning industry, and assists members in collaborative initiatives. Members include: a) private and public universities

and colleges, community colleges, other accredited course and degree providers, and professional associations that support education; and b) organizations and suppliers of services, equipment, and tools that demonstrate the Sloan-C quality principles. Associate memberships are available to institutions that share an interest in online education and Sloan-C goals, but that have not yet listed online programs. As of mid-2004, membership was fully underwritten by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.

HISTORY

In 1993, the Sloan Consortium began as an idea in a meeting convened by Frank Mayadas, the Project Director for the Alfred P. Sloan program for anytime-anyplace learning. Leading practitioners from schools that were developing online education courses and programs met at the Omni Hotel in Manhattan (The Sloan Consortium, 2003a) to consider the potential that electronic communications could bring to learning outside the classroom. In *The Network Nation, Human Communications via Computer*, Hiltz and Turoff (1981) had already used the term “learning networks”; “asynchronous” was added to create the now familiar name “asynchronous learning networks” or ALNs. “Asynchronous” conveys the idea that people learn at various times, and not necessarily all at the same time and in the same place: “ALNs are people-networks for anytime-anywhere learning. ALN combines self-study with substantial, rapid asynchronous interactivity with others” (Bourne, Mayadas & Campbell, 2000, p. 63).

Founded in 1934 as a non-profit philanthropic organization, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation improves

quality of life by supporting initiatives in science and education. Its program for anytime-anyplace learning seeks to make available *high quality-learning, education, and training, anytime and anywhere, for those motivated to seek it. Through ALNs, learners can access instructors, classmates, course assignments, and other educational resources over the Internet. During the past decade, the Sloan Foundation has committed approximately \$48 million to ALNs, including grants to colleges and universities, and planning and dissemination activities, with the goal of making higher education “an ordinary part of everyday life” (Gomory, 2000).*

ACTIVITIES

In its first years, the ALN administrative center was at Vanderbilt University under the direction of John R. Bourne; in 2000 the center moved with him to the Franklin W. Olin College of Engineering and Babson College in Needham, Massachusetts. Now called the Sloan Center for OnLine Education (SCOLE), the center is the administrative home for Sloan-C activities. Not yet formally incorporated, Sloan-C activities are funded by the Sloan Foundation, guided by its board members, and enabled by its administrative staff and membership.

As the Executive Director of Sloan-C at SCOLE, Bourne is the founder and editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks (JALN)*, a widely read, peer-reviewed, online journal that is acknowledged as a major resource for knowledge about online learning. Inaugurated in March 1997 as the premier online journal in its field, *JALN* features peer-reviewed papers based on results that are supported with empirical data. In 2000, SCOLE also began publishing an annual series of volumes on quality in online education, collections of case studies that emerged from annual invitational research workshops. Each of the volumes is disseminated for knowledge sharing among wider audiences of practitioners in book form and via annual online workshop series. A major activity each year is the annual conference, which attracts more than 500 practitioners. Hosted by the University of Central Florida, and chaired by Gary Miller of Penn State, the *10th Sloan-C International Conference on Asynchronous Learning Networks: From Innovation to Mainstream* convened in November 2004 in Orlando,

Florida. Sloan-C Conference proceedings and presentations are archived and accessible online.

The Sloan Consortium Catalog lists more than 600 online peer-reviewed degree and certificate programs. The Sloan-C homepage (<http://www.sloan-c.org>) cites membership including more than 500 colleges, universities, state systems, consortia, and organizational members who work:

...to help learning organizations continually improve quality, scale, and breadth according to their own distinctive missions, so that education will become a part of everyday life, accessible and affordable for anyone, anywhere, at any time, in a wide variety of disciplines.

As a network of people helping to advance online learning, Sloan-C members freely access Sloan-C at <http://www.sloan-c.org> for resources including *JALN*, the *Sloan-C View* newsletter, annual volumes in the Sloan-C quality series on online education, the database of effective practices, the bureau of speakers and consultants, listservs, annual and occasional conferences and workshops (online and face-to-face), awards, the annual national survey of the status of online learning, and the Sloan-C catalog of online programs.

From its inception, Sloan-C emphasized that the “networks” in ALN include not just technological infrastructures, but the people networks that ALN supports in ways not possible before. “We think of every person on the network as both a user and a resource,” says Mayadas (1997). Thus, online communications are a powerful, technology-assisted means for rapid communications among multiple audiences (Mayadas, 2003).

In the history of higher education, the potential of ALN for making higher education much more widely accessible and for constructing knowledge communities is unparalleled. ALN also promises to bridge divides between the two parallel, but frequently separate worlds of academic and corporate learning. Because ALN is a truly new and disruptive technology, Sloan-C finds it is useful to identify principles and metrics that can help establish benchmarks and standards for quality. Thus, Sloan-C members endorse a multi-perspectival framework that is based on continuous quality improvement.

Five principles, known as the pillars of quality (see Table 1), guide the familiar process of identifying

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