Community Colleges in America and Distance Learning

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Community colleges in the United States have played an important role in the development and implementation of various forms of computer- and media-based education. A common mistake made when discussing distance learning in American higher education is to fail to distinguish the policies and practices of different institutional types. Generalizations about distance learning are particularly misleading if one does not recognize the very large differences in mission, resources, stakeholders, and external pressures between community colleges and four-year institutions.

In America over the past 30 years, community colleges have clearly demonstrated the greatest commitment to the application of distance education technologies. In the 1970s, community colleges developed telecourses to deliver course work, which have found a steady audience up until the present time. Course developers such as the Public Broadcast System (PBS; funded partly by the Annenberg Foundation), Dallas Telecourses, and Coast Community College District regularly supply course content to other institutions through licensing agreements. On the other hand, four-year universities, with a few notable exceptions, have been slower to become involved in modern forms of distance learning. As community colleges began to receive attention for their use of distance learning, many four-year institutions began to respond for various reasons including out of fear of being left behind.

In one study (Berg, 2002), it was found that community colleges have different attitudes toward distance learning than doctoral-degree-granting institutions. The former focuses more on access and providing information technology skills, while research institutions are more likely to develop distance learning programs with explicit revenue motivations. In some cases, basic institutional survival is also a reason for using distance learning. While community colleges may not focus on seeking new sources of revenue in the same way as independent institutions, they do in some instances seek sustained enrollment for institutional survival. Nevertheless, access is consistently an important one for community colleges time and again. In the 2002 study, institutional representatives indicated access as a primary reason for involvement in distance learning. On the other hand, research institutions in particular are concentrating on using distance learning to forge corporate relationships. One can see this tendency in a number of high-profile videoconferencing programs often in engineering departments at institutions such as Stanford University, George Washington University, Boston University, and the University of Southern California.

As with individuals, organizations have complex and multiple motivations for their actions. By looking more closely at the specific differences in practices between community colleges and four-year institutions, we get a deeper understanding of distance learning in America. Faculty compensation is a key practice in distance learning. According to the same study (Berg, 2002), community colleges tend to compensate faculty more through regular load payment (47.9% regular load with normal enrollment limits, compared to 32.1% for doctoral-degree-granting institutions) and are less likely to pay an additional stipend (8.3% compared to 18.9% for doctoral-degree-granting institutions). An additional aspect of faculty compensation is ownership of course material developed for distance learning courses. A comparison of copyright policy by type of institution shows that two-year community colleges (63.3%) and the small number of institutions offering bachelor's degrees (78.6%) responded more often that the institution itself holds the rights (master's-degree-granting institutions report 30.6% and doctoral-degree-granting institutions responded with only 34.0% that the institution owns the intellectual property rights). Conversely, doctoral-degree-granting

(26.4%) and master's-degree-granting institutions (16.3%) responded more often that faculty members own the rights to the courses they develop (as opposed to 10.2% for two-year institutions). Joint ownership was claimed at a much higher rate at master's-degree-granting institutions (30.6%) than either community colleges (14.3%) or doctoral-degree-granting institutions (13.2%).

Community colleges in America have different attitudes toward distance learning and computer-based learning than doctoral-degree-granting institutions: The community colleges focus more on access and providing information technology skills, while research institutions more often develop distance learning programs with explicit revenue motivations. Two-year institutions played more of a leading role in the development of distance learning in America than four-year institutions. Although community colleges have concerns about the eco-nomics of distance learning, they appear predominantly driven by their mission to provide access.

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KEY TERMS

Community Colleges: Most numerous American higher education institutions that are supported by the government, emphasizing preparing students for transfer to four-year colleges and on providing skill education in specific vocations.

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