Going the Distance

By Nannerl O. Keohane

Powerful forces, both intellectual and financial, are moving higher education in the direction of increasing reliance on information technology. In the coming decades, we will develop a variety of new technologies and partnerships, new delivery mechanisms and consortia of providers.

Anyone who still needs to be convinced of how exciting the prospects are for IT in the immediate future should become familiar with some of the many successful experiments in distance learning. Networking within and beyond the classroom allows us to transform the face of higher education by extending access, overcoming physical and logistical constraints, and putting powerful tools for collaboration and analysis directly into the hands of the students.

One of the sources of this excitement about distance learning, and also of the challenges that lie ahead, is the fact that we are in an age of exploration: the landscape is still largely uncharted. We would do well to consider carefully what seeds we plant in this brave new world, so that we can concentrate on cultivating those most likely to bear fruit for our students. ‘Tis new to us, and we should be aware of the consequences.

It is worth pausing over the major assumption I just made. Many factors come into play in investment decisions about distance learning; whether it will benefit students may or may not be the first question we ask. It is certain that these — extending access, acquiring new revenue sources, providing new creative opportunities for our faculty and staff, testing new technological services that can be used to good effect in supporting other parts of our endeavor — can be sought and sometimes found by extending high education as a necessity. Happily, therefore, those who are not “first through the door” will not find all doors closed to them.

Duke University, like many other institutions, has used distance education responsibly and to good effect to bring together widely scattered audiences: executive MBA students on different continents; working nurses in rural hospitals in underserved counties in North Carolina. We hope to keep our eye on the fundamentals for which there is an overwhelming interest.

In cases where we decide that distance learning technology clearly helps provide educational opportunities to new groups of people, and also fosters teacher-student and student-student interaction, we’re ready to “go the distance.” When our impassioned intention to serve students and our cold-hearted business case converge, we move forward.

Nonetheless, the pressures on universities and colleges sometimes skew choices in how and whether to enter the distance learning market. It is perhaps better to sober us that, as Robert Zemsky put it, some “institutions distort their purpose in the pursuit of new student markets, developing new programs more in the hope of revenue enhancement rather than from any deeper conviction about the viability or overall benefit. No doubt this is as true in educational technology as it is in the marketing of VCRs or jell-O. But as has so proved to be the case, being on the ‘bleeding edge’ carries peculiar risks, as well as the more mundane costs of start-ups and initial investments. The barriers to entry are substantial, and requirements include much more than the ability to design a great Web site.

Fortunately, there is good evidence that the pie is growing bigger as formal education becomes increasingly understood as a lifelong process. People retire earlier and live longer, and they take more courses and degrees as they grow older. In our knowledge-based society, where the financial as well as the psychological benefits of higher education are becoming clearer all the time, more and more young people are investing their education as a necessity. Happily, therefore, those who are not “first through the door” will not find all doors closed to them.

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