The concept of distributed learning for a rural liberal arts college is a multifaceted issue. The role of using distributed learning must be directly correlated to the mission of the college, and the institution needs to consider the existing technology infrastructure to determine the viability of implementation. The selection of distributed learning software programs should be a well-considered process that allows for times of input, research, and campus-wide discussion, involving faculty, information technology staff, and students. This or not is to determine criteria that may be considered when evaluating distributed learning software, but the list is by no means inclusive.

- **In-house Resources**
  Institutions must carefully evaluate the internal resources, both personnel and staffing, available to support distributed learning software. Some institutions may be able to handle the technical problems, maintain the server, and perform daily backups. Many distributed learning companies will agree to host courses for colleges. Some of these companies require a minimum number of courses, and others offer a full range of e-portal services (including online registration, access to online research support services, and other student services). A college should pay close attention to the limitations on storage space for a course and to the restrictions on activities (e.g., no streaming video).

- **Scalability**
  Some software companies will host courses on a per-course basis; others insist on a minimum of ten, for example. If an institution chooses to purchase the software for in-house use, this is not an issue, unless altering to new software is necessary.

- **Cost**
  It is always an issue for institutions with limited resources for distributed learning. Among the many factors that may be considered in the selection of distributed learning software are in-house and outsourcing issues. In-house issues include the purchase of the software, housing it on an institutional server, and training. Some packages are available free of charge but are limited in functionality, storage space, or other factors. As in life, nothing of value is free. Colleges should pay careful attention to the number of users and what the license will allow. If an institution opts to house the server in-house, it must ensure high reliability and accessibility. There must be staff available 24-7 to handle problems and questions and to guarantee that services are uninterrupted. Both faculty and, to a lesser extent, students need to be trained in the use of the software. Integration with other back-office software packages requires another level of support and training. Outsourcing issues include the following: (1) should the distributed learning software package be selected with other e-portal services or should it be chosen on a per-course basis? (2) is it necessary to purchase the software for in-house use? (3) what are the hours of support? (4) what types of training are offered and how much is available? Some issues that are common across packages are the cost for a set of courses, per-course costs, sliding-scale costs for offering more courses, and costs for levels of support, number of users, and number of students enrolled in classes. Each of these must be weighed individually to determine what is best for a particular institution.

- **Support**
  The level of support for an institution depends on how much local support is provided, what hours of service are offered, who is allowed to call the company for assistance, and what level of assistance is provided. The small rural liberal arts institution is often understaffed and lacks the expertise in staffing to handle the amount of work required for distributed learning support. If the technical hardware/software support is outsourced, the institution can focus on in-house support training. The issue of when someone may call for support is crucial to the operation because if a problem arises at 2:00 a.m., the vendor may have someone available at that time to address the problem. Some companies may permit only one or two designated people to call for assistance, whereas other companies allow anyone based on the license agreement, to call for assistance. Likewise, some companies may provide various levels of assistance depending on the license agreement, and this needs to be taken into consideration as well.

- **Functionality**
  The issue of functionality is directly correlated to the needs of a particular institution. An institution must consider the use of the distributed learning software and whether or not it is to serve both online course development and integration of the Web into the curriculum, because the functionality needed may not be the same. The software must be flexible enough to handle a diverse array of needs, from the simple posting of syllabus to the possibility of streaming video. Other factors that may be considered are ease of use, faculty and student support, and whether the software provides or allows for the following: templates for course design, online quizzes, threaded discussions, group work, online gradebooks so that students can check grades, individual discussions, scheduling materials posted, and linking to external resources. All the packages are similar to, yet distinct from, one another.

- **Partnership**
  If at all possible, an institution should explore partnerships with other institutions. Some companies may permit only one or two companies to purchase a software package, the means of consortially purchasing equipment, or agreeing to shared arrangements for hosting or training services. Higher education institutions need to work together to support the educational needs of students. Although all the criteria mentioned above is important, the selection of a software package, the means of achieving this goal is just as important. There are many ways to select a software package, the most important of which is to involve key players in the selection and discussion process. Interested faculty, administrative personnel, information technology personnel, and students must all have input. An institution may employ focus groups, form an ad hoc committee, or utilize other organizational means. The important point to be kept in mind is that the institution should make it possible for the institution to establish its criteria, its uses, the approach, and the answer to the questions posed above. The institution may choose to have a survey faculty and students as to needs and interests for distributed learning courses. Informal discussions with academic departments can provide insight into the needs of the unidentified faculty interested in distributed learning. Small rural liberal arts faculty who have used distributed learning software, attendance at conferences, and visits to software vendors and other campuses aid in the evaluation process.

The result of the process is the selection of a software package that will support the institutional mission and that is affordable and scalable. It is decided important that the chosen package be able to support the needs of faculty and students and be widely accepted. The purchase and selection of a software package does not ensure that quality distributed learning will take place. Once the package is selected, the institution should have a plan in place for implementation, support, and training. Standards and evaluation criteria are also needed for the efficiency of distributed learning in the overall educational process.

Ultimately, the criteria for selecting distributed learning software programs depend on the needs of a particular institution. The small liberal arts college is in a constant developmental process that is often several steps behind the research in education. In all decisions, it is important to make sure distributed learning software, the highest goal to provide a quality liberal arts education to students and to enhance the accessibility and quality of the overall learning process.

**Distributed Learning and the Liberal Arts College**

By Rita Gulstad

Rita Gulstad is the Director of Libraries and User Services at Central Methodist College in Fayette, Missouri. Professor Gulstad was directly involved in the planning and implementation of technology-based instruction. She also provides direction for campus computing and the Smiley Library at Central Methodist College.