A number of technological innovations and social trends have dramatically changed the lives of students over the last 25 years. New forms of digital communication call for a revised model of interaction and collaboration among students, faculty, and institutions. Kenneth Morrell, associate professor of Greek and Roman studies at Rhodes College, describes the formation of a virtual classics department, whose 15 member institutions are scattered from Virginia to Texas. The collaboration is driven by the conviction that, collectively, they can create a wide-ranging and sophisticated undergraduate program that will compete with the most prestigious research universities in the world.
The New Information Culture

Fifty percent—51 million households—in America are connected to the Internet. Seventy-six million Americans actively use the Net, and 135 million more, about half of the entire population, have access to the Net through shared facilities. Perhaps even more significant, a 1998 survey showed that 35 percent of all users had used the Internet to chat, and among those 18 to 24 years old, 50 percent did so. A 1999 survey reported that 41 percent of respondents have “met a new friend online,” and among college students, it was 66 percent.

The likelihood that the population in general and incoming students in particular will make increasing use of digital technology to communicate with each other is almost certain. For students to feel at home on our residential campuses, colleges and universities must make some concessions to the world from which students come. Without abandoning all of our cherished conventions and wisdom, we must find ways to embrace some of theirs.

Implications for Colleges of the Liberal Arts and Sciences

How will the emerging 7/24/365 culture affect higher education in general and small, residential liberal arts colleges in particular? Many colleges and universities (along with a host of corporate partners) have embraced the idea that some aspects of the educational enterprise can be removed from the highly personal, interactive, and discursive environment of the classroom to be packaged and sold to an eager and expansive market. This new form of education could dwarf the traditional constituency of college-bound students. Some claim that the new culture of information will render the need to relocate students physically to learning communities obsolete, or at least economically inefficient. Consequently, many believe that the long-term prognosis for residential liberal arts colleges is not promising.

Colleges can begin to face the challenges posed by new technologies by exploring the possibilities they present for teaching and learning. For residential colleges, one way of incorporating information technology into the curriculum (as well as allowing students to conform to some of the conventions of the Internet culture) is to create a network of similar institutions around the world. Such collaboratives take advantage of digital communications and expand students’ educational experiences beyond the confines of their residential college.

Sunoikisis, A Virtual Department of the Classics

Since 1995, with the support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, faculty members in the classics from the 15 member institutions of the Associated Colleges of the South (ACS) have focused on developing a community of scholars and teachers to form a virtual classics department. This virtual department was dubbed Sunoikisis, after a term used by Thucydides to describe an alliance of cities on the island of Lesbos during the Peloponnesian War. Their aim is to offer a high quality program that will attract some of the best students in the country, build interest in their programs, and ultimately exert a beneficial influence on the nature and direction of the discipline.

Stakeholders in the project had to overcome two major constraints in developing the virtual department.
The first was the conventions of the academic schedule and calendar, and the second was the definition of a "course," which is largely responsible for the current controversies concerning faculty compensation.

The two-year effort to design the inter-institutional collaborative courses (ICCs) offered through Sunoikisis illustrates these problems. Of the five institutions participating in a collaborative online advanced Latin course in Fall 2000, for example, no two colleges have the same daily schedule. No two colleges have the same academic calendar, and two of the five colleges are in the eastern time zone, the others in the central. (Monday evenings at 6:00 p.m. central time was finally settled upon.)

One solution for overcoming the dissimilarity among the ACS institutions is to look for partners with similar institutional profiles around the world with whom we can form alliances and provide curricular opportunities outside of the current schedules. For example, combining the conventional days of 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. of two ACS colleges, one from the East Coast and one from the Midwest, yields just one additional hour of possible courses for each campus. Expanding to a partner on the West Coast increases the possible range of offerings from 10 to 12 hours. Finally, adding two more institutions in England and Australia, for example, would expand programmatic possibilities to 23 hours a day.

Yet even if we were to successfully unify our academic schedules and calendars, and form alliances with sister institutions abroad to provide continuous academic programming, we would still face problems with the nature of the programming itself. At the crux of the issue is the definition of a course. The ICCs incorporate three traditional modes of academic discourse: the lecture, the discussion, and face-to-face interaction with faculty members in small groups on each campus.

Faculty participation varies widely across ICCs. On one end of the spectrum is an ICC offered primarily by one professor and Web cast to the other institutions with cooperating faculty members on each campus serving as local tutors. At the other extreme is a course designed and offered by a team of professors, each taking responsibility for one or more weekly units of the course. Additionally, to preserve the most basic element of the residential experience at liberal arts colleges, each participating institution should offer adequate on-campus contact and support for enrolled students.

Clearly, learning experiences of this nature, which include lengthy planning efforts and widely varying distributions of specific tasks, do not conform to the conventional definition of a course used by most colleges and universities. The Internet and efforts to create inter-institutional collaborative courses have contributed to the increasing obsolescence of the administrative definitions of a course.

We propose a shift in conceptualizing the academic endeavor for two essential reasons. First is to promote a means of allocating resources among institutions to meet fluctuating needs and enhance the quality and diversity of programs more efficiently. Second is to remove the structural barriers that hinder the development of collaborative, synergistic initiatives that will create more innovative and attractive educational experiences for the next generation of students. Courses could be replaced, for example, with a more meaningful measurement that would encompass actual contact hours, the hours spent in preparation and evaluation, and credits taught. This proposal would allow faculty members to allocate their time and energy more freely among a wider range of instructional activities.
Broad inter-institutional collaboration raises the issue of “intellectual trade,” wherein for some semesters, some institutions would inevitably experience negative balances and some positive, but over time, with judicious management, the system could eventually reach an equilibrium. The benefits of allowing for more creative educational experiences, new programs of study, and ultimately a better position as compared with our competitors are worth the risk of imbalances.

**Conclusion**

In the spirit of the liberal arts, we take pride in enabling students to become lifelong learners. We need to educate our students in a way that will empower them to understand and use technology. We need to accomplish this not just by developing their ability to use specific applications, but by introducing them to the underlying principles of the information culture. The new academic enterprise we propose should merge the old and the new. It should incorporate the best and most enduring conventions of academia, which reach back to the work of Aristotle and the teachers of the Greek Enlightenment before him, along with the most promising possibilities of the new, global culture of information.

Kenneth Morrell is associate professor of Greek and Roman studies at Rhodes College. He was a member of the team that developed “Perseus: Interactive Sources for the Study of Ancient Greek Civilization,” a collection of texts and images on CD-ROM also available on the Internet. He has published several articles and book chapters.

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