Now that Students Have Wings

KENNETH S. MORRELL
Rhodes University

Morrell describes the formation of a virtual classics department whose members are scattered among 16 institutions from Virginia to Texas. Key issues that the group is working to resolve center on scheduling and the measurement of faculty input to the virtual classes — essentially, the definition of a course. The collaboration was driven not only by the fact that technological advances make it possible, but also in response to the culture of today’s students, most of whom are immersed in the ubiquitous digital world. Moreover, faculty at the department’s member institutions are convinced that, collectively, they can create a program for undergraduates that will compete with those at the best research universities in the world.
By the summer of 2000, 50 percent of households in America (51 million) were connected to the Internet. Roughly 76 million Americans were actively using the Net, and 135 million, about half of the entire population, had 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 had “met a new friend online”; among college students, it was 66 percent. Without question, the 7-days-a-week, 24-hours-a-day culture our students inhabit is very different from the world we experienced in our youth.

It is virtually certain that the population in general, and our incoming students in particular, will increase their use of digital technology to communicate with each other. Because these media of human interaction are not constrained by time and location, they will allow (and in many cases require) members of our society (including our students) to adopt schedules that may strike some of us as unusual. To others, especially those who embrace and preach the virtues of Franklin’s “early to bed and early to
rise” dictum, these schedules may seem counterproductive at best and dangerous at worst.¹ We must, however, keep Herodotus in mind and distinguish between what is convention or custom and what is human nature. He noted,

If one were to place every human being in the position to choose the very best from all human customs, everybody would, after a thorough investigation, choose his own. Everyone firmly believes that his own customs are the best. Consequently, no one but a madman would consider such things ridiculous.²

So, with the recognition that, in many respects, our students’ ways are no longer the ways of their elders, we will explore some implications of the new information culture.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR COLLEGES OF THE LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES**

How will the emerging seven-days-a-week, 24-hours-a-day, 365-days-a-year culture affect higher education in general and small, residential colleges of the liberal arts and sciences in particular? Without doubt, as David Noble argued, the new technologies have given rise to a greater “commoditization of instruction.” 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. They could be packaged and sold to an eager and expanding market, which may dwarf their traditional constituency of college-bound students.³ Claims of this type are not new. Plato warned about removing ideas from the context of human discourse by encoding them in written form.⁴ Yet, if anything, the new technologies have made these
commodities far better or at least brought them closer to Plato’s interactive ideal.

Rather than focus on what has long been a problem for academia, let us address the more important issue: What form will real-time, human interactions take in the new culture, and can the new technology actually help realize the person-to-person encounters that Plato believed were a better means of conveying knowledge than the written word? Some might claim that the new culture of information will render the need to locate students physically in learning communities obsolete or at least economically inefficient. Consequently, the long-term prognosis for residential colleges of the liberal arts and sciences is not promising.

I note, however, that the impulse for young people to gather together “in real life” (“IRL”) stems from a variety of human needs, which communities of learning are well adapted to meet. I see no reason why these communities cannot respond to the needs of the new generation and provide a complementary virtual world that embodies the same relatively sheltered, student-centered values. For students to feel at home in such communities, the institutions should make some concessions to the world from which the students now come and to which many will ultimately return. In other words, without abandoning all of our own cherished conventions and customs, the university must find ways to embrace some of theirs.

When the academic enterprise revolved around papyrus scrolls, manuscripts, or printed books, and when faculty members and students spent time both alone and with colleagues huddled around those texts, engaging students in the classroom with the texts open on their desks was an indispensable part of the educational process. Now faculty members are getting and disseminating more of their information online, and students are spending more time using the Internet both as a source of information and as a medium of inter-
personal interaction. Consequently, as academic mentors we cannot afford to send the message that we somehow devalue this medium by not admitting it into other aspects of our academic work, including the face-to-face discussion, to which most academics rightly attach great value. Like other sources of information, including books, radio, and television, the Internet offers much that is important and valuable and much that is not. It is our responsibility as academics to help students understand the difference and develop their abilities to judge for themselves. This should not be threatening to colleges and universities because it is not the conversation per se or the discussion that distinguishes and defines the experience, but the interlocutors and the ideas. Whether the members of each unique gathering are there in person or contribute to the conversation via fiber optics from points around the globe should not ultimately matter.

Once we feel more comfortable exploring the possibilities of digital technologies, we can move to the more difficult challenges: when and how.

Colleges and universities find themselves at the center of conflicting ideals. Colleges, on the one hand, feel the need to compete more aggressively with their larger siblings, the research universities, both in terms of the range of their programs and the significance of their research. They feel the attraction, as do their students, of the larger, more expansive cultural and intellectual world. They also feel compelled to reinforce and market their images as the nurturing and protective “gated communities” of higher learning. On the other hand, in spite of the lure of new dis-

NOW THAT STUDENTS HAVE WINGS

The long-term prognosis for residential colleges of the liberal arts and sciences is not promising.
coveries and the investments and recognition they bring, universities are increasingly troubled by a sense that their undergraduates have become the neglected stepchildren of their graduate programs and research centers.

New challengers compound this crisis of identity for both colleges and universities. On one side are corporations that train their own employees rather than depend on institutions of higher education, as well as institutions that exist wholly or significantly on the Internet and provide courses for credit and degrees to a whole range of traditional and nontraditional students. On the other side is a rapidly evolving market of college-bound students who might even view the diversity and richness of the large research university as somehow inadequate and confining when compared to the teeming energy of the global village.

LEVERAGING THROUGH NETWORKS

For residential colleges, one way of incorporating information technology into the curriculum is to create a network of similar institutions around the world that would take advantage of digital communications to expand educational experiences for students. Some institutions have taken tentative steps toward such networks. Since 1995, faculty members in classics from the member institutions of the Associated Colleges of the South (ACS; see the sidebar “ACS Members”) have been working on a set of collaborative initiatives. These have focused, above all, on developing a community of scholars and teachers, a “virtual department,” scattered across 16 institutions from Richmond, Virginia, in the east to San Antonio, Texas in the west. With funding from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, we have held a series of workshops to improve our ability to use information technology and develop a framework
for more ambitious avenues of collaboration, including an archaeological excavation and survey in southwestern Turkey with Bilkent University in Ankara, and a series of on-line courses.

We are driven by the conviction that we can collectively create a program for undergraduates that will compete in terms of the range, progression, sophistication of the courses, and opportunities for scholarly engagement with those at the best and most prestigious research universities in the world. By offering such a program, we believe that we can attract some of the best high school students in the country to our campuses, see the interest and participation in our programs grow, and exert a beneficial influence on the very nature and direction of our discipline.

The actual economies of this network are severely constrained by the current conventions of the academic schedule and calendar. Of the five institutions that participated in a collaborative online course for advanced Latin students in the fall of 2000, no two colleges have the same daily schedule. No two colleges have the same academic calendar. Two of the five colleges are in the Eastern Time zone, and the others are in the Central Time zone. Even if all members of the ACS were to unify their academic schedules and calendars, we still face the limitations of conventional working hours. As a rule, classes begin around 8:00 A.M. and conclude sometime in the afternoon before dinner. Most end earlier to allow for athletic practices, and nearly all campuses offer laboratories in the af-

ACS Members
Birmingham-Southern College
Centenary College of Louisiana
Centre College
Davidson College
Furman University
Hendrix College
Millsaps College
Morehouse College
Rhodes College
Rollins College
Southwestern University
Spelman College
Trinity University
University of Richmond
University of the South
Washington and Lee University
afternoon, generally between the hours of one and six o’clock. The periods with the heaviest concentration of courses are those between 9:00 A.M. and noon. Consequently, the consortium cannot realize real collaborative economies as long as the bulk of instruction at each institution takes place within a relatively short span of the day.

In light of these constraints, creating a program for the emerging generation of students nurtured by the global information network will compel us to look for partners of similar institutional profiles around the world with whom we can form alliances and become a worldwide academic enterprise. For example, combining the conventional business days of two of our colleges, one from the East Coast and one from the Midwest (8:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M.), yields only one additional hour of courses at each campus. Expanding the alliance with a partner on the West Coast increases the possible range of offerings from 10 to 12 hours. With the addition of two other institutions in England and Australia, our alliance could offer academic programming 23 hours a day.

Even if we were to surmount the constraints outlined above by unifying our academic schedules and calendars, adopting an international time standard, and forming alliances with institutions abroad to provide continuous academic programs, we would still face problems with the nature of the programming itself. At the crux of the issue is the definition of a course, which is largely responsible for the current controversies concerning faculty compensation. A number of groups, ranging from research academics who find themselves beleaguered by legislatures and trustees for only teaching two or three courses a year, to the exploited part-time professors who must teach 10 or more courses a semester to earn as much as their full-time peers, are ill served by a system that defines their professional activity in terms of “courses.” For those who are working to create inter-institutional learning
experiences for their students, the idea of a course is proving problematic for a different set of reasons.

**REDEFINING COURSES**

Members of Sunoikisis, the virtual department of classics in the ACS, have been developing the design for inter-institutional collaborative courses (ICCs) for the past two years. Conforming to the structure of the conventional course, which generally includes three hours of classroom activity, our plan calls for each ICC to include three components: an hour-long synchronous meeting for all participants in the course, an asynchronous threaded discussion among the students monitored by faculty members, and a tutorial offered by a faculty member on each campus. Consequently, the course incorporates three traditional modes of academic discourse: the lecture, the discussion, and the face-to-face interaction with faculty members in small groups or in individualized tutorials on each campus.

Each ICC will allow for different levels of participation for faculty members. On one end of the spectrum is an ICC offered primarily by one professor and Webcast to the other institutions where cooperating faculty members on each campus serve as local tutors. On the other end of the spectrum is an ICC designed and offered by a team of professors, each taking responsibility for one or more weekly units or components of the course. For example, professors might take responsibility for offering the lecture, designing the study questions, and monitoring the discussion for one or more weeks, or they might divide the components of the course among themselves, with one offering the lectures and others designing the study questions, monitoring the discussion, or creating and scoring examinations. At the very least, however, to preserve the most
basic element of the residential experience at colleges of the liberal arts and sciences, each participating institution should offer adequate on-campus support for students who enroll. This support should include at least one hour of contact between a participating faculty member and the students each week. In other words, we neither advocate the idea of distance education that dispenses with face-to-face interaction altogether, nor do we accept the position of those who claim that instruction and discussion should take place primarily if not entirely in the context of face-to-face gatherings.

In the fall of 2000 Sunoikisis offered an ICC for advanced students of Latin on the literature of the Neronian period. Over the course of 11 weeks, students and faculty members “attended” a Webcast lecture every Monday evening at 6:00 p.m. Central Time. Each of the faculty members took responsibility for at least one week of the program, including formulating the study questions for the online discussion, offering the lecture, and helping the director moderate and evaluate student responses in the discussion. Support from the Mellon foundation also made it possible to invite three guest lecturers from research institutions outside of the consortium. They traveled to three of the colleges, worked with students in a tutorial setting, and offered a public lecture not only on a topic of significance for members of the course but also one of interest for a wider audience. Our goal was to make the Web-casting of these lectures as unobtrusive to the lecturer and audience as possible. The only visible evidence was a wireless microphone on the speaker’s lapel and a workstation somewhere in the lecture hall where one of the faculty members monitored the course’s chat room in order to forward to the lecturer questions from the students listening to the Webcast.

To create the asynchronous discussion during the week after the lecture, students posted their answers to the study questions and responded to the answers of at least one of
their peers. Finally, students met for at least one hour during the week with the participating faculty members on their campuses to review the texts. The joint activities of the course fell within the semester calendars at all of the institutions; however, the semester on each campus was extended so that faculty members and students could meet independently and address topics and texts suited to the needs and goals of the individual students and programs.

To help foster a sense of community among the students, everyone was required to provide some basic personal information such as their favorite foods and postgraduate plans. They also had a dedicated chat room, the Deversorium, where they could interact in an online “lounge” for students. To respect the students’ virtual space and also give them the opportunity to meet with faculty members, each faculty member agreed to enter the Deversorium one hour each week for an online “office hour.”

This description of an ICC illustrates how learning experiences of this nature do not conform to the conventional definition of a course. No single faculty member can assume the entire responsibility for any ICC. Each professor’s contribution will fall somewhere between what would be considered a full course to approximately a third of the hourly commitment for a standard three-hour offering. The trend toward interdisciplinary learning experiences on individual campuses, the growing number of courses with service learning or language components, and the efforts to create inter-institutional collaborative courses have all contributed to the increasing obsolescence of the administrative definition of a “course.” The Internet will only accelerate this process.

Based on our experience, I propose a modest shift in conceptualizing the academic endeavor that a consortium or group of colleges could adopt with two needs in mind. The first is a means of allocating resources among institutions to
meet fluctuating needs and enhance the quality and diversity of programs. The second is to remove barriers that hinder the development of collaborative initiatives to create more innovative and attractive educational experiences for the next generation of students.

Colleges routinely rely on two measures of the work of faculty members in the classroom: the number of courses a professor offers and the number of students in those courses. In reality, however, the term “course” is an expression that could be described by two more important measures. The first is the number of hours a professor spends in the classroom. Most would agree that the expression “contact hours” is actually a multiple of a number that measures the time faculty members devote to the instructional mission of the college. Naturally, this number will vary from institution to institution and among faculty members of differing status. However, based on surveys conducted over the last 25 years, that number probably falls somewhere between 18 and 24 hours per week for a significant percentage of professors at colleges of the liberal arts.12 The second measure is the number of units or credits that students earn by attending the course. The number of credits is the most important measure because it reflects the ability of an institution to move students toward demonstrable levels of expertise both in their chosen fields of study and general areas of knowledge, certified by granted degrees.

What I advocate is to replace “courses” with more meaningful and accurate measures: contact hours or a more comprehensive measure such as hours of instruction (which would include the actual contact hours and the hours spent in preparation and evaluation) and credits. Each faculty member would then be responsible for spending a certain number of hours per week in teaching (offering a certain number of credits and working with a certain number of students), which would serve not only as a more precise reflection of a
professor’s engagement as a teacher, but also as a more accurate statement of a college’s mission. After all, a college does not exist to offer courses per se, but to create academic experiences, directed and evaluated by faculty members, which result in a student’s mastery of a body of knowledge and development of a set of skills.

This proposal would allow faculty members to allocate their time and energy more freely among a wider range of instructional activities. These would include discussions and lectures in the conventional classroom setting, supplemented by other modes of interaction, such as synchronous and asynchronous communication over the Internet. There would be fluctuations from semester to semester; and as the barriers to “free intellectual trade” fall, some institutions would inevitably experience negative balances and some would experience positive balances. Over time, with judicious management the system would eventually reach equilibrium. From my perspective, the benefits of allowing for more creative educational experiences, new programs of study, richer opportunities for students, and ultimately a more competitive position vis-à-vis our competitors, are worth the risk of imbalances.

PROVIDING AND USING TECHNOLOGY

A final set of considerations concerns the necessary computing infrastructure. The rapid evolution of the infrastructure requires that we join with similar institutions and form common data centers to support the educational enterprise. This strategy will position colleges to constrain the growth of spending on information technology and to compete for expertise in an increasingly tight labor market, whether colleges create these data centers themselves or form partnerships with commercial ventures. As the Internet becomes
increasingly critical to the success of the enterprise, these data centers must incorporate sufficient redundancies to avoid system-wide failures. The fundamental characteristics of the data centers (capacity, integrity, and reliability) must also extend to the network that connects the campuses and the centers. The creation of these centers will enable smaller colleges to participate more actively in major Internet initiatives such as Internet2, which currently does not include a single college of the liberal arts and sciences among its member institutions.\textsuperscript{14}

Finally, in the spirit of the liberal arts, we need to educate our students in a way that will empower them to understand and use technology, not just by developing their ability to use specific applications but also by introducing them to the underlying principles of the information culture. I do not suggest that every undergraduate be able to write a computer program in Java, but rather that each student understand what a programming language is and how it differs from a natural language. I do not advocate that students become fluent in the conventions of XML tagging, but that they should understand how information is structured and how they can create data that could migrate from one generation of software and hardware to the next.

We take pride in enabling students to become life-long learners by introducing them to a number of disciplines and bodies of knowledge and by insisting that they are able to apply basic mathematical concepts, understand the scientific

\textbf{We need to educate our students in a way that will empower them to understand and use technology.}
method, and effectively communicate within their own and at least with one other culture. We should also provide them with the capability of understanding the technology that now enables all of those activities.

MARRIAGE OF THE OLD AND NEW

Let us return to Alexander at the Rock of Sogdiana. Many of us who have been on the campaign from the beginning and who have participated in this and other sieges, now see a new generation whose knowledge, skills, and stamina enable them to make the climb far more easily and efficiently than we ever could. So while it might have appeared to those holding the rock that we older climbers could fly, to us the new generation seems to have truly sprouted wings.

In closing, I offer this epilog. Oxyartes, one of the surviving leaders of the resistance, was not among the Bactrians who surrendered their position on the rock. One of his daughters, Roxane, was. According to Arrian, the “men who took part in the campaign used to say that she was the loveliest woman they had ever seen in Asia, with the one exception of Darius’ wife.”15 She was, in fact, so beautiful that she caught Alexander’s attention. He fell immediately in love, but in spite of his infatuation, he refrained from exercising his conventional prerogative as conqueror and, instead, arranged to marry her, drawing her father out of hiding and into the family. In a small way Alexander realized one of the ambitions he had developed during his conquest: bringing the people of Asia and the Greeks together as a new people. So, too, the new academic enterprise I have proposed 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 Alexander’s own tutor, Aristotle, and the teachers of the
Greek Enlightenment before him, along with the most promising possibilities of the new global culture of information.

NOTES

5. See Ron Bel Bruno and Megan Gerrity, “The Big Picture,” *Yahoo Internet Life*, Sept. 2000, p. 93–95. They cite a study from the University of Texas at Austin that reports that the industries that create the content and infrastructure for the Internet accounted for 650,000 new jobs. These industries now employ 2.5 million people, more than those in insurance, communications, and public utilities combined.
6. A term used by Norman Fainstein, Dean of Faculty, Vassar College in “Technology’s Potential to Inform and Transform Processes of Thinking, Teaching, and Learning,” a panel presented at the Summit on Technology in Liberal Arts Colleges at Middlebury College, June 2000. For a summary see <http://www.cet.middlebury.edu/CETweb-Docs/programs/P2001programs/summit/panel1.html>.
7. I wish to acknowledge the work of Mark Garrison at Trinity University, who serves as the field director of the excavation in southwestern Turkey. In the spring semesters of 1999 and 2000 he directed a one-unit, online seminar to prepare students for work in Turkey the following summers. During those seminars he developed and refined a number of the elements we have incorporated into the design of our three-unit ICCs.

9. The principal collaborators in ICLAT 393 are Miriam Clark and Kevin Crotty at Washington and Lee University, Stephen Clark at Centenary College of Louisiana, Hal Haskell at Southwestern University, Anne Leen at Furman University, Rebecca Resinski at Hendrix College, Scott Rubarth at Rollins College, David Sick at Rhodes College, and Walt Stevenson at the University of Richmond.

10. Brad Inwood from the University of Toronto, who has widely published on Stoic philosophy and is currently working on an edition of Seneca’s letters for the Clarendon Later Ancient Philosophy series and the Cambridge Companion to the Stoics; Richard Tarrant, the Pope Professor of Latin Language and Literature at Harvard University, who has published extensively on Latin poetry including editions of Seneca’s Agamemnon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) and Thyestes (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985); and Catherine Connors from the University of Washington, who recently published Petronius the Poet: Verse and Literary Tradition in the Satyricon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

11. For designing elements to create community, see Rena M. Palloff and Keith Pratt, Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace: Effective Strategies for the Online Classroom (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999), 59–86.


13. Actually, the number of credits and the number of students could be combined into a student-credit ratio. For example, if a faculty member offers 3 courses for a total of 9 units and 20 students enroll in each course, the student-credit ratio would be the number of students divided by the number of total credit hours, in this case 6.67.

15. Arrian 4.19.5.

Kenneth Morrell is Associate Professor of Greek and Roman Studies at Rhodes College. He earned his Ph.D. in classical philology from Harvard University. Morrell is involved in an initiative funded by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to incorporate the use of informational technology in the study of ancient Greece and Rome. He and colleagues in the Associated Colleges of the South are creating a virtual classics department that will expand learning opportunities for students of the ancient Greek and Roman worlds at the member colleges. He was also part of a team that developed “Perseus: Interactive Sources for the Study of Ancient Greek Civilization,” a collection of texts and images on CD-ROM and also available over the Internet.