



Why Distance Education Will Fail and Harm Higher Education

by Dr. Farhad Saba

Distance Education Cures the Ills of Education

Over the past five years, those of us who have been in the field of distance education for thirty years are witnesses to an unbelievable spectacle. And for the third time in fifty years distance education has been touted as the elixir that will cure all the ills in education and training. However, what is different is that never before has this much attention, money, publicity, and hope been invested in its practice in business and education.

For example, I have seen waves of articles about why education at a distance would fail twice in my professional lifetime, so in anticipation of a third wave I am rushing to be the trendsetter!

The failure is not of technology, or poor instructional design alone, although there is room for both to improve. The problem resides where technology, instructional design and the organizational structure of the university converge.

The insistence of higher education to use distance education within the confines of its existing organization aggravates its current systemic problems, while solving very few of them if any at all. For example:

1. Cost - One of the major reasons to adopt technology in any institution is to reduce costs. Despite billions of dollars of direct and indirect investment in technology in higher education, there has been a steady increase in tuition and fees for students, which have been well above the rate of inflation in the past decade. In the mean time, there has been a great reluctance on the part of many administrators, and academic governing bodies to increase the number of enrollments for online courses. Many online courses are taught with 20 to 25 students enrolled in them, numbers that are nowhere near making such courses independently sustainable. Therefore, distance education

courses are heavily subsidized, and in some cases cost more than the comparable class on campus.

2. Time-to-degree - Students in popular state institutions spend more than 4 years completing their degree requirements. The primary reason are many students, who increasingly have to work to support a family, have to wait their turn to find a seat in required classes that are full. The irony of this is most online courses are designed based on this model and are sure to have waiting lists for them too. This model dismisses the major benefit education at a distance can offer: mainly individualized instruction. And students are still locked into the same sequence as their peers in the classroom.
3. Competency - There is no standard of competency for those who design and implement distance education systems in higher education or in business and industry for that matter. In a few instances when unskilled but entrepreneurial faculty have tried to deal with these problems, the results have been catastrophic. On my campus, a colleague who had no training in the field of distance education managed to sign a multi-thousand-dollar agreement with the university to provide what seemed to be individualized instruction to a relatively large number of students. To make a long story short, the university has terminated his contract, and the faculty has launched a law suite against the university.

These three examples are enough to illustrate distance education is going to be another opportunity missed for advancing and meeting the needs of the students as long as it is used in the confines of an out-of-date organizational structure that has not changed much for well over a century.

Distance education should not try to replicate the classroom experience online. It is a new system of relationships between instructors and their students. Using technology to teach requires a professional staff of instructional designers, media specialists, programmers and others to support the faculty in providing individualized instruction to each student.

For example, this is somewhat similar to physicians who are supported by nurses, and various paramedical professions to provide individual attention to patients. Imagine a hospital that had

arbitrary similar treatment for every 25 patients who walked in through the door!

Again I cannot stress enough that technology in distance education is not to replicate the classroom experience for the student. It is to make the personal instructor-learner relationship stronger, and provide a dynamic time-space where students and instructors can communicate with each other. And this communication changes in time during the course of an instructional session based on how much structure the faculty must impose on the instructional-learning experience to lead the learner and how much autonomy the learner is comfortable with in order to achieve his or her goals.

Time will only tell the future of this new wave of optimism surrounding the field of distance education and it remains to be seen whether it will succeed or fail. And it depends on the road we choose to follow. We have two choices, will we follow the road where faculty and administrators are willing to implement distance education systems according to the body of knowledge in the field or the road where we try to replicate the classroom online.

We believe if we follow the road where technology is used to reduce the cost of education, and speed-up time-to-degree for students, while making education more personal, it might succeed.

Its success, however, does not depend on better technology or better instruction by faculty alone, but depends on the massive reorganization of the university in the scale of what the business and industry managed to achieve during the 1990's.

In other words, using post-industrial technologies, within the confines of an industrial organization are not going to show any beneficial results, and it may even intensify the current problems and damage the institution.

Organizational Change

The recession of the early 1990's prompted several state governors to take a serious look at how they could serve an increasing number of students, with their dwindling resources. At the same time, business and industry was going through a massive reorganization to become leaner, and more productive by adopting high technology.

During this time, a popular term in private firms was "re-engineering". Management gurus argued that simply adopting high technology was not enough to reduce cost, they also were required to change management practices. In other words they needed to develop new organizations, putting the front-line worker in direct contact with the management through the use of technology.

The result of these changes and other technology-driven management innovations has been the longest period of uninterrupted economic growth in recent times in the United States.

Also during this time of change, governors of various states from Maine to California called for adoption of high technology for cost containment. States appointed high-level commissions to study the use of technology in education, and how it could benefit their system. In the meantime, increasing proliferation of the Internet, and maturing of web-based technologies made adoption of distance education more interesting for many administrators and a few faculty too. The result was the formation of new institutions, like the Western Governors University (WGU) and the provision of unprecedented support for existing efforts to use technology for extending the reach of the university beyond the campus.

In contrast to business and industry, however, universities have not gone through any re-organization. By and large, most institutions of higher education use distance education in the image of their brick-and-mortar practice, by merely placing courses online, or having their faculty project their classroom beyond the campus via television. In the few instances when there is a commitment to institution wide, such as the Pennsylvania State University, the distance education program is not an integral part of the academic units.

And even for Penn State and a few other similar organizations to bring distance education in from marginal practice into the main stream it was necessary to establish enclaves within the system. In other instances, such as WGU the enclave is not within, but outside of any single institution of higher education.

The organization structure of the majority of the rest of institutions, however, has remained intact while adopting a practice that will eventually cause them more harm than good if they don't change.

Summary

Distance education has a rich history that should not be ignored. As professionals in the field we have an obligation to take an active role in providing direction in the current market frenzy.

Remember replicating the classroom online won't work but using the technology to provide a personalized, rich experience can.