

Faculty, Funding, and the Future: Shaping e-learning Policies in Ohio

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Distance delivery of education creates many tensions and raises issues within conventional academic structures. This paper began as a white paper for use by the OLN Futures Panel, an expert group convened to assist the Governing Board in strategic planning; it identifies some of the most salient issues at the state and national levels, which are highly integrated with one another. For the purposes of this session, we have interwoven additional questions that we would like e-learning stakeholders to consider as Ohio moves forward developing an approach to e-learning. Questions are broad such as:

What works in Ohio? What policies can work here? Within which structures must policies be framed? How are policies inter-related?

Questions in this paper also are more specific, such as:

Given Ohio's budgetary stress, should all new distance endeavors by public institutions be collaborative?

Vision/Mission/Goals/Scope. Nationally both states and institutions are considering the following sorts of questions as they develop their e-learning capabilities.

Distance learning for what purpose? To what end? Why provide distance learning? Will it be a formal entity? Non-profit or for-profit? Answers to these questions provide the basis for addressing other questions. Many entities have entered the arena or expanded their role in the arena of distance learning before thoroughly—and openly—understanding why they are doing so. Sometimes different stakeholder groups will have diametrically opposed reasons for starting a distance learning enterprise.

A myriad of reasons (right or wrong) are given for providing distance learning opportunities, to:

- Make money, a profit, increase revenues.
- Increase student learning.
- Build technical infrastructure.
- Substitute for physical seats and/or buildings.
- Substitute for personnel labor costs.
- Advocate use of cutting edge technologies.
- Reach students who would not normally attend college.
- Compete with other institutions.
- Satisfy faculty/students/administrators.

What will be the scope of the distance learning enterprise? Will it include K-12, community colleges, four-year institutions, and/or private institutions in the state? What will be provided—entire degree programs, certification programs, courses, collections of courses, modules within courses, or single events such as seminars or workshops?

What exists currently in Ohio? How did that structure or policy approach develop in Ohio? Was it well thought out? Who and which entities were involved in the discussion? Have any important stakeholders been left out of the discussion? As e-learning evolves are there other stakeholders and reasons to consider the impact it may have in Ohio?

Once decisions are made about what the purpose and scope of the distance learning enterprise will be, then the nature of the entity will be better defined. Will it be a stand-alone, accredited entity? Will it be an “aggregator” or an “integrator” of many distance learning activities? Will it be a consortium of institutions? Will it be collaborative?

One approach that some states take is to foster collaboration and a shared responsibility across the state for e-learning. If stakeholders within Ohio considered this approach, how would it work in Ohio? Or, is this already occurring and if so, to what degree? Are activities marginal and haphazard or planned and strategic? Are the multiple “city states” within Ohio a barrier or an opportunity? How can an e-learning approach be structured and how can policies be developed that encourage collaboration rather than competition? Given Ohio’s budgetary stress, should all new distance endeavors by public institutions be collaborative? Should the Ohio General Assembly be involved in e-learning strategies for the state? If so, to what degree? Should e-learning be a focus of the new Ohio Commission on Higher Education and the Economy? Should e-learning be used in place of a reduction in offerings? Should e-learning be used to increase offerings?

Money. No distance learning enterprise operates at no cost; therefore, costing and funding arrangements are of paramount importance. The Technology Costing Methodology (TCM) project of the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications is one way to standardize discussions of cost across forms of technology and education. Costs may include building the infrastructure, developing the distance-delivered degree programs, developing distance-delivered courses, developing distance-delivered modules, developing distance-delivered assessments, providing user support services, and providing technological support services for both students and faculty. How are costs accounted for particularly when these activities are accomplished collaboratively across departments, institutions, and even states? How can state funding formulae be adapted to discourage competition and to instead encourage collaboration with other institutions?

Ohio has been participating in an early TCM pilot study. The findings indicate that costs for distance or e-learning vary widely. Using TCM helped some campuses determine strategic directions for e-learning, for instance, the mix of technologies used. How can Ohio build on this work? What has been learned that can help shape a costing policy for all of Ohio?

A cornerstone of TCM is that there are real costs at both ends of the spectrum—when developing and delivering a course and when bringing the course in to be delivered to your students, there are student support services costs, etc. Revenue sharing is key to institutional participation, regardless if delivering or importing courses or programs. What constitutes a fair and equitable distribution of monies?

Do Ohio institutions both send and receive e-learning content? Do institutions in Ohio incur these types of costs at both the receiving end and at the delivering end of the spectrum? What would be a fair and equitable distribution of funds across the spectrum? Some inter-institutional alliances have used a distribution of 75% to the teaching institution, 12.5% to the receiving or student's home institution and 12.5% to the coordinating group for administrative costs. Would a similar distribution work in Ohio? Could or should OLN assist in this activity?

Most people typically underestimate how much it costs to deliver education at a distance. Until quite recently, “Distance Education” at most postsecondary education institutions was segregated to self-support, auxiliary units. Now, as its importance waxes, individuals from other parts of campus, who may not fully understand funding differences and how those funding differences affect strategic decision making, want to “make money” just as they see a self-support unit doing. These individuals may not realize that these fiscally sound units operate in the black because they carefully choose what, how, and when to deliver various courses and programs. There is much more strategy and costing consideration given to self-support unit decisions than perhaps go into decisions made in conventional academic departments where courses may be offered that barely meet enrollment guidelines and may not fulfill departmental needs. Similarly, many “hidden” costs are real costs in distance learning. Land grant institutions in particular offer educational opportunities as part of their “land grant missions”; these courses are often heavily subsidized, which becomes apparent when costing out these same courses for distance delivery.

What other assumptions that have real financial results or hidden costs exist in Ohio?

Other issues involving money are the continuing struggles with provision of federal financial aid to students for whom the majority of classes are distance delivered. Twenty-four institutions are participating in the federal Demonstration Projects that provide waivers as new approaches for awarding aid are developed. As more students opt for distance-delivered education, federal officials are aware of their role as the rate-determining step in the country. They remain committed to balancing what is best for students with being fiscally prudent to avoid fraud and other crimes.

Distance learning is also the arena where vendor relations and outsourcing have become central to functioning. Initially the questions may be technical. Which course management system has the capabilities needed? Which technologies work with one another? Would creating this technology or software in-house make more sense? What is the trade off of time and effort with money and relationship to an external company?

The new world of distance learning depends on shared responsibilities, whether it is multiple institutions delivering education to individual students, faculty teams teaching a single online course, or the enhanced partnership of students and faculty members to ensure that learning occurs in a distance delivered environment. How will these shared responsibilities be acknowledged? Supported? Rewarded? The Open CourseWare (OCW) project at MIT is an example of sharing that will result in the full disclosure of course contents by MIT faculty for all of their courses, an unprecedented level of candor within higher education.

The new alliance among Ohio Learning Network, OhioLINK, and OSC/OARnet named the Ohio Commons for Digital Education, exists to collaborate and provide statewide-shared services that will increase efficiencies and economies of scale. Course management tools are a constant source of rising costs for many campuses. Can a statewide effort in open source products reduce this cost or would that merely shift cost? Technical support of e-learning is time consuming and costly. Are there ways in which a statewide effort could increase support, types of services to users and contain costs? Where in Ohio are economies of scale possible through shared resources and collaborative e-learning projects?

Academic. A major drawback of simply making course management tools available is that course pedagogy may not be rethought or redesigned. Just like having access to word processing software does not make a user Virginia Woolf or Shakespeare, neither does access to course management software necessarily make users good online instructors. It propagates the problem that most of postsecondary education has been trying to address for more than a decade—how to support faculty who are subject matter experts in the use of better pedagogical techniques to facilitate learning. Much more *a priori* attention must be paid to courses and programs delivered via distance techniques simply because they must largely stand alone without an instructor or teaching assistant nearby to provide immediate clarification. To do so requires course and program developers to explicitly and adequately plan ahead of time for new courses and programs. This level of deliberateness in curricular development has not been a hallmark of postsecondary education in the past. How can it now be encouraged? Once the courses and programs are developed, how are the same look and feel ensured for them so that students know which institution they are working with simply from the images presented to them through the course management system?

The return to formal curricular development can shift many faculty into the role of life-long learner because pedagogy and instructional design are probably not areas in which they are experts. Faculty development then becomes a priority for distance learning entities; support is required not only in instructional technologies but also in pedagogical issues and student service provision. How will faculty be encouraged to use faculty development resources provided for them? Will they be rewarded or compensated? Or is this already part of conventional faculty duties?

The nature of academic programs will change. No longer will they be primarily defined as a collection of courses; instead, specified sets of student learning outcomes will define a program. Moving to an explicit structure of competencies and assessments will force instructors to give hard consideration to what students should know and do as a result of what learning opportunities students experience.

How can such curriculum-wide outcomes be established on a practical basis in Ohio? How can this be accomplished across postsecondary institutions? Should it? What competencies do stakeholders want graduates to have? How are these assessed via distance?

Other academic issues that have always been around but that are exacerbated by distance learning are transfer and articulation of courses and programs from institution to institution. What can be transferred? Faculty disdain for courses created by others is only magnified when those courses are also distance-delivered. How is the quality of a course ensured? How is that quality documented? What assessment will allow students to demonstrate their learning to the satisfaction of the instructor? Or to a different instructor in a succeeding course? Or to a faculty member at a transfer institution? How does an instructor know that a prerequisite course taken via distance delivery is comparable to the same distance delivered courses at her institution? How does she know that the distance delivered course is comparable to a face-to-face course?

Could several Ohio institutions agree to deliver a single collaborative online degree? Why or why not? The OLN Futures Panel suggested "buying in" to Ohio needed degrees from accredited institutions from outside the state. Is this a possibility? Why would it work? What policies would be needed to make it work? How could coherence be ensured? Consider these financial incentive policies:

- a) Designate funds for send and receive sites -- those institutions that help a student matriculate by advising them on transfer courses would receive a small subsidy for the student.*
- b) Broaden definitions of "reciprocity" for distance learning. Kentucky and other neighboring states want to create relationships with Ohio to broker content across state borders. Direct programs could be brokered state-to-state with a fair market value price established--something less than full out-of-state tuition but more than in-state tuition.*
- c) Fund collaborative content for degrees and specialty courses at a distance, including high demand degrees in education, engineering and information technology.*
- d) Create one statewide, fully -articulated, General Studies degree at both the associate and bachelor's levels. It would be easy to jumpstart the degree by combining two strategies -- new incentive funds and existing providers. Several institutions offer some parts or all of a Gen Studies degree at a distance. With appropriate incentive funds and a ROI process, these providers will coalesce into one statewide "Regents" degree. Prior experience, portfolio and credit by exam must be built into the degree while maintaining full academic rigor.*

A related issue is that of coherence. As students take multiple courses from multiple institutions, not only is a press being created on existing transfer policies—many limit the number of distance-delivered courses that count—but increasing pressure is being put on faculty to document how a particular collection of courses put together by an individual student constitutes a “coherent” program of study. What steps can be taken by distance learning entities to ensure coherence?

Currently two Ohio institutions – Lorain County Community College and Columbus State Community College – are participating in a national study of quality standards by the American Academy for Liberal Education. The institutions are ‘testing’ a set of quality standards for the online liberal arts degree as part of a larger multi-state Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) grant. The results of this project may influence accreditation standards.

Students. With distance comes greater anomie and isolation, an increasing need to be connected to a larger entity through support services, and often less patience on the part of non-traditional students with the “pass-the-buck” and/or “you can wait” mentality frequently found in postsecondary institutions. Institutions are finding that when they put student services online, they are not services for their online students but instead online services for all of their students—distance and on-campus. These online services may begin simply as basic information presented as web pages; but as both students and institutions become more sophisticated, online student services are increasingly becoming capable of providing individualized service. Online student services are becoming one-stop shops through portal or primary sites. They are centralized, comprehensive, well thought out, and learner-focused. At what level should student services be centralized? The state? The system? The institution? The department? Is it okay to have parallel systems of online student services being provided? Who monitors the various student services to make sure they give synchronized information? Who decides what services get “webicized” first? Who’s responsible for the online student services—the primary entity that provides them? If an institution provides online student services, then is the Chief Information Officer or the Vice President of Student Affairs responsible? Does it ever become mandatory for a student to talk with a real person?

Who is responsible for e-learning students in Ohio? Each institution? Ohio's prevailing philosophy has been my students = my money. Who serves ‘swirling students?’ Can Ohio better serve students?

Faculty. Culture and policy largely determine how faculty divide their time between the three primary goals of higher education: teaching, research, and service. Distance learning requires a further disaggregation—or “unbundling”—of faculty time in order to recognize (and reward) participation in curricular and instructional design activities. It may also be that further divisions of labor and assignment of activities either via outsourcing or to other internal agents may improve curriculum design. Allowing instructional designers to develop curricula and technical experts to build courses using state-of-the-art learning management systems frees individual instructors to focus on the mediation function—the one-on-one interaction with students needed to help them make sense of the subject matter. Are faculty willing to accept this bargain? Trading off total control of development (although maintaining ultimate control of the curriculum)

for more mediation interaction with students? Are faculty willing to be unbundled? If not, what are their root concerns?

Changing faculty behavior requires a concurrent and equally supportive change in formal promotion and tenure guidelines, as well as other forms of tangible and intangible benefits distributed to faculty within the wider academic culture. Faculty who intentionally use competencies, assessments, and scoring rubrics to describe and credential student learning must be recognized and rewarded. If they are not, the message will be clear to other faculty that despite positive rhetoric, such behaviors are not really accepted by the institution, and faculty commitment will quickly diminish.

How can a distance learning entity such as OLN encourage and support faculty who are innovative? What can Ohio do and what remains a campus responsibility? What incentives for behavior exist in policy? What barriers to behavior exist? How are promotion and tenure guidelines adapted to include distance learning? How is collaboration on distance learning with faculty from other institutions recognized? Rewarded? How can union contracts be reworked to validate and include faculty work on distance learning?

Technology. There are constant needs to keep up with the advance of technical infrastructures. Budgets must be reworked to include refresh cycles for computing equipment as well as funds to purchase the latest forms of technology. Each new piece of equipment brings with it new needs for training and ongoing user support, particularly as the integration of information technology into instruction proceeds. Students, faculty, and administrative staff must continually have their skills updated. Whose responsibility is it to plan for this user training and support? If distance learning is provided at the state level, how much of this burden do individual institutions carry? How can these costs be incorporated into prices charged so that they are recouped?

Just as student services become more individualized, instruction is also becoming more customized, how can this trend be captured and used to address variability in student learning needs? Can “smart” course management systems be developed? If so, how then do the user support needs change? How do technology infrastructures change?

Finally, software—actually “middleware”—is needed to facilitate the sharing of data and information between unlike systems, usually the traditional student information system and the system used to track distance learning courses. Once distance learning courses are fully integrated into institution-wide systems this middleware will no longer be necessary.

What changes are required in order to facilitate this integration of systems at the state level in Ohio? Across states? Within institutions or systems? Does the Ohio Commons have a role here? What about funding these activities? How does the Third Frontier set of activities fit into campuses use and need for technologies? Who would facilitate that discussion?

Governance/Policy/Quality. A multitude of policy issues arise with the increase in distance learning. Some sit at the campus, but others are statewide concerns. Among them are:

- Reconciling (or not) multiple academic calendars
- Developing common databases to increase the availability of course objects, courses, services, learning modules, etc.
- Addressing licensing and royalty arrangements within a variety of institutional, system, and state policy frameworks.
- Creating policies for states heavily invested in previous technologies such as satellite networks as they move to online and mixed delivery modes.
- Moving away from time as a limiting notion, manifested as academic calendars that require fidelity to semesters or quarters.
- Accrediting and assuring the quality of alternative delivery modes using rigorous criteria applied equivalently to both new and conventional delivery.
- Collaborating to determine useful data definitions and collection about distance learning enrollments, etc.
- Eliminating artificial boundaries that confuse students and may obstruct progress toward stated goals.

Conclusion

These are just a few of the tensions and issues that occur at state and national levels with the integration of distance education within conventional academic structures. The Ohio Learning Network is well situated to address many of these concerns and help Ohio higher education become a leader in distance learning. Ohio needs to determine what its goals are in e-learning...and what role is played at each institution, across institutions, and how OLN can help institutions reach their goals and the state's goals.