

The Myth about E-Learning

*“We Don’t Need to Worry
about E-Learning Anymore.”*

A few years ago, college and university presidents often remarked: “We’re going to develop an e-learning program. The train is leaving the station. We’ve got to be on it.” In those years of hype and hyperbole, many felt that millions of dollars could be made by putting courses online. Numerous grandiose claims and promises were made. Few were fulfilled. The dot-com era had a sobering end. Few of the “virtual universities” have survived, much less struck it rich. As a result, educators now often say there is no need to worry about e-learning anymore.

The past is not always a good predictor of the future, however. Consider the dot-com failures. Few virtual universities were based on a solid business plan. In fact, some had no business plan at all. The understanding of the technology and the organizational changes that would be required with e-learning was unsophisticated. Few institutions were prepared for the up-front investment required. And neither the faculty nor the market was ready.

In addition, many institutions were unsure about what e-learning is. Is it online coursework for students at a distance? Is it the use of online tools to enrich, enhance, and extend content or collaboration? Is it totally online, or are only portions of the course online? The terms and definitions around e-learning can be confusing. *Distance learning*, *distributed learning*, and *e-learning* are often used interchangeably to describe the delivery of postsecondary education degrees, programs, and courses independent of fixed time and place. The students can be residential, commuting, or at a distance.

Now may be exactly the right time to “worry” about e-learning. The majority of institutions offer some type of e-learning today. Over half of all postsecondary institutions offered distance education in 2000–2001. Among two-year public institutions, 90 percent offered distance education. Of public four-year institutions, 89 percent did, compared with 40 percent of private four-year institutions. Well over 100,000 distance education courses are offered today.¹

Online enrollments are predicted to continue growing. Not only are the numbers up; growth rates are climbing as well. The 2003 growth rate was 19.8 percent; the estimate for 2004 was 24.8 percent. In fact, online enrollment is growing faster than student enrollment. In a Sloan Consortium survey, 53.6 percent of institutions agreed that online education is critical to their long-term strategy. And a majority of academic leaders stated their belief that the quality of online instruction is equal to or better than the quality of traditional instruction.²

Although online learning clearly has a growing presence in higher education, discussions about implementing e-learning continue to lack consensus. Part of the problem, as noted above, is the definition of *e-learning*. Many educators assume *e-learning* to mean that an entire course and all the interactions between faculty and students are online. But today’s definition has morphed from a fully-online course to the use of technology to deliver some or all of a course. Hybrid courses integrate face-to-face and online components. In a hybrid course, the class may meet face-to-face once or twice a week, with the remaining class

time being spent online. Hybrid courses use e-learning. As more institutions struggle with increasing enrollments and inadequate classroom space, hybrid courses are becoming more common. By reducing the classroom requirement, institutions free up space for other courses.

E-learning is also a way to increase flexibility in and improve access to postsecondary education. For the growing population of adult learners, the demands of balancing work, family, and learning make e-learning a valuable option. For these students, completing courses is easier to do with the flexibility of e-learning. Flexibility can be valuable for traditional students as well. Students now work more and have frequent scheduling conflicts due to other activities. E-learning provides students with the flexibility to fit the course with their other obligations. And as the number of class sections is reduced due to budget cuts, students are finding that e-learning is a good way to keep their academic program on track.

In addition, e-learning can increase the quality of education. A growing number of programs utilize online laboratories, simulations, and visualizations to help students gain experience and improve their understanding of complex subjects. In other cases, technology is used to enhance interaction in traditional lecture classes. There is a direct correlation between interaction and learning effectiveness. And technology allows students to use the tools of their discipline to conduct research, providing apprenticeship opportunities. “Online courses have characteristics that are unique to the technology, which allows the exploration of new and richer pedagogical models.”³



Illustration by Roland Sarkany, © 2005

Three other factors indicate that now is the time to worry about e-learning. First, traditional-age college students have grown up using technology; it is an integral part of their lives. They have used technology in school and expect to use it in college. Second, faculty are more familiar with technology. They have adopted it in their research and in their personal lives. Tools such as course management systems are facilitating the use of technology in instruction. Third, the tools have matured significantly. Rather than a faculty member needing to write code, the instructor can search learning object repositories and download materials. Major collections—such as MERLOT, the National Science Digital Library (NSDL), and the Co-operative Learning Object Exchange (CLOE)—reduce the challenge of finding content. Other tools enable the editing of video and audio and the development of digital collections.

E-learning will have an increasingly important role in higher education. However, the “e” will slip into the background. The technology is taking its proper place as an enabler rather than as the focus. Students don’t focus on the technology; they focus on what they want to accomplish. They come to college to learn.

At each institution, the CIO and the executive team should discuss the following strategic questions:

1. *How do we define e-learning?* For some, e-learning may mean a fully online course. For others, it may mean the use of a course management system. Discussing the strategic implications of e-learning will be impossible if there is no common definition.
2. *What experience and expectations do students bring to our institution?* Most

of today’s college students have grown up with technology and the Internet. They expect technology to make their lives easier and more convenient. Conducting a Google search is much faster than going to the library. Downloading music online is simpler than going to the store. They expect immediacy and automation as well. The idea of filling out paper forms, mailing them, and waiting for a response is anathema to this generation. Older students (and faculty) have been touched by these same attitudes.⁴ Did the students use technology more frequently, or more robustly, in high school than in college? In the workplace? Do they expect technology to be used to improve their learning? To improve convenience? The assumption that students want more technology may not be valid, though. When studying generational differences, the University of Central Florida found that younger students are less satisfied with online learning than older students.⁵ The reason appears to tie to their expectation of being in a face-to-face, social environment. Older students care more about flexibility. Rather than assuming we understand students’ experience and expectations, we should ask them.

3. *Does technology provide a mechanism to make learning more relevant?* Personalization, customization, and interaction are all important facets of successful learning environments. Does the institution have enough resources and faculty time to personalize, customize, and interact *without* using technology?
4. *Can we address the cost and access questions without e-learning?* Although there is a cost to e-learning, how does it compare with the alternatives? If enrollments are growing, physical space is limited, and building a new campus is not an option, how can all those students be accommodated? E-learning may be the only viable option. And even though e-learning has costs for infrastructure, faculty development,

and support, can the institution afford to do nothing?

5. *Are we too focused on the “e” and not enough on the learning?* Faculty and administrators sometimes feel that the use of technology in instruction is impersonal. But when students talk about technology, they do so more often as a verb than as a noun. They “IM” their friends; IM here is an action, not a technology. Many faculty and administrators also fear that the faculty member will become obsolete. However, students are much more likely to focus on “learning” than “e-learning.” When asked, students consistently say they want to interact with faculty who are experts and who care about them. They care less about the medium of the interaction.

It’s true: we no longer need to worry about the e-learning train leaving the station. But now *is* the time to worry about whether we are using the technology to improve quality, increase access, and enhance the flexibility of learning programs. Learning is the issue; “e” is simply a mechanism.

Notes

1. Ronald A. Phipps, for the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative (NPEC) Working Group on Access-Technology, *How Does Technology Affect Access in Postsecondary Education? What Do We Really Know?*, NPEC 2004-831 (Washington, D.C.: NPEC, 2004), <<http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2004831>>.
2. I. Elaine Allen and Jeff Seaman, *Entering the Mainstream: The Quality and Extent of Online Education in the United States, 2003 and 2004* (Needham, MA: Sloan Consortium, 2004), <http://www.sloan-c.org/resources/entering_mainstream.pdf>.
3. Phipps, *How Does Technology Affect Access in Postsecondary Education?*, xii.
4. Diana G. Oblinger and James L. Oblinger, eds., *Educating the Net Generation* (Boulder, Colo.: EDUCAUSE, 2005), e-book, available at <<http://www.educause.edu/educatingthenetgen>>.
5. Joel Hartman, Patsy Moskal, and Chuck Dziuban, “Preparing the Academy of Today for the Learner of Tomorrow,” in Oblinger and Oblinger, *Educating the Net Generation*, <<http://www.educause.edu/PreparingtheAcademyofTodayfortheLearnerofTomorrow/6062>>.

Diana G. Oblinger is Vice President of EDUCAUSE, where she is responsible for the association’s teaching and learning activities and for the direction of the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (ELI), formerly known as the NLII. Brian L. Hawkins is President of EDUCAUSE.