

Quality Education, at a Distance

When it comes to higher learning, today's technology has shown itself to be a tool with remarkable potential for transcending physical boundaries: Almost magically, the advantages of a 400-seat college lecture hall can be transported into one's home or a remote classroom. Many state governments are eager to embrace a future in which many thousands of "distance learners" tap into universities and colleges via modems and television satellite dishes. But before states go gangbusters on gadgets, they ought to understand that technology best serves students when it complements their educational experience, not supplants it.

Here in California, community colleges have used distance-learning techniques—which allow students to listen to and participate in discussions and lectures without being in the classroom—since the mid-1970s. More recently, California State University has experimented with two-way video at its Sacramento, San Jose, Hayward and Chico campuses. And even the University of California is in the act, having used teleconferencing for the first time two years ago.

The idea is beginning to catch on throughout the West. Last month governors from nine western states met in Washington, D.C., and announced plans to establish a regional virtual

university. Heading in this direction makes sense. It would free valuable classroom space; building maintenance costs would be reduced; students could get the classes they needed quicker, and they might become able to graduate sooner. What's more, nontraditional students—the employed, or those with family obligations or physical disabilities and unable to get to campus—might gain new access.

As with most advances, there is a downside. Should budget shortfalls threaten higher education, as has been the case in California, will states be tempted to substitute machines for educators? This is not a sensible option. Distance learning should not be allowed to fall below the quality that comes with good classroom education. Transport education, yes, but do not diminish traditional virtues. The importance of the relationship between student and teacher has been recognized since the days of Socrates and Plato.

Across the educational establishment, there are inevitable differences in academic philosophies, grading standards, curricula and class schedules that will complicate intercampus cooperation. And then there is the question of the academic mission itself. Will it be compromised if universities shift their emphasis to mass-marketing individual courses?

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