Current News

Perspectives: Increasing Access and Relevance in Distance Education

by Robert W. Mendenhall
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Distance education is now well-accepted as high-quality higher education, although as with traditional campuses, the quality of different programs varies widely. While the goal was once to show that distance education was equal to classroom education, the unfortunate result is that it is rarely better than classroom education. In fact, most distance education is simply broadcasting, via TV or the Internet, the classroom experience. This may include live lectures, or simply posting the syllabus online and allowing assignments to be submitted online, but it hardly uses the power of the technology that is now available.

Further, distance education, especially online education, is rarely less expensive and is often more expensive than traditional classroom instruction. Part of the reason for this is that the purely online universities are almost all for-profit (with the exception of our university), and the traditional institutions have significant disincentives to making online education less expensive.

There is a better way.

We know two things about adult learners: they come to higher education knowing different things and they learn at different rates. We individually even learn different subjects at different rates, depending on our experience and aptitude. Yet our traditional higher education institution requires the same number of credit hours from all students for a degree, the same required courses, and all courses take the same length of time to complete (a semester, or term). Western Governors University (WGU) has introduced a new model to higher education: competency-based education.

In competency-based education, the competencies required for a degree are defined — that is, what a graduate must know and be able to do. Students graduate based on demonstrated mastery of these competencies — measured via a series of assessments — rather than by accumulating a certain number of credit hours or clock hours. These competencies are developed with input from industry, to ensure that they are current and relevant. Yet competencies should not be confused with simple work skills — the competencies employers and educators value most include critical thinking, problem solving, working in teams and with diversity, leadership, creativity, written and oral communications, etc. Grounding competencies in the real-world helps ensure they are relevant to students now and after they graduate.

Students are then able to access technology-based learning resources to learn on their own, on their time and at a place convenient to them (over the Internet), but with personal faculty mentoring every step of the way. Technology allows the instruction and the learning to be personalized to each student and their individual needs. Students can thus learn at their own speed, and demonstrate their mastery of competency when they are ready by scheduling their assessment at a testing center convenient to them.

One of the myths about distance learning is that students lose the important interactions with faculty and other students. In truth, little interaction happens in large lecture halls and limited office hours on campus. With high-quality technology-based learning, all students are part of learning communities and have regular phone, email, instant messaging, and other electronic

communications with both faculty and students. Further, the students tend to be more diverse as they are drawn from across the county and from different life experiences and work perspectives, thus further enriching the educational experience. The truth is that an online education more closely mirrors today's workplace than does the classroom. Increasingly, people learn, work, communicate and collaborate at a distance, via technology, with people all over the country and the world.

Another challenge for distance education is determining who is doing the work — although this is a bigger problem in traditional education than is commonly acknowledged. Since competency-based education depends on the assessment of competencies, a variety of assessments are utilized, including objective tests, performance tasks, projects, portfolios, and so on. Objective tests are taken at secure, proctored testing centers across the country, where students are required to show a picture ID.

Access to higher education is subject to many factors including affordability, time, and geography. Distance education can deliver education to those that live far from a campus. Some of that distance education may be synchronous, or live, requiring students to be available at certain times. Flexibility and access are increased when the instruction is asynchronous, allowing students to access it at times convenient to them. But the biggest issue with time is not flexibility but the amount of time required and the relevance of the time spent. Students with existing competencies should not have to spend time or money on material they already know. Finally, technology-based education, at scale, should be inherently more affordable, if we are using the power of technology to teach and not simply as a means of delivery.

What is the potential of these changes to the higher education model through harnessing the power of technology? At WGU, tuition is under $6000 for a twelve month year, and that is without state subsidies of any kind. Over 75 percent of students are underserved in at least one of the following four categories: low-income, minority, rural, and/or first-generation college. The average time to graduation is under three years. And students and employers report that graduates are equipped with all the necessary competencies to excel in the workplace.

There is a better way. If we are willing to change.

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