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# Thinking about Distributed Learning? Issues and Questions to Ponder

Steven Sorg

## **Abstract**

*Effecting institutional change requires vision, leadership, strategic planning and campus-wide involvement. Issues and concerns regarding the implementation of distributed learning are being debated in universities across the country. At the very least, administrators and faculty should examine institutional goals and strategic plans; faculty development needs and capabilities; student support services; technical and personnel infrastructure; policies; and systematic evaluation for program improvement.*

## **Introduction**

Metropolitan universities have varied missions often dependent on location, founding purposes, and whether the institution is public or private. They offer educational opportunities ranging from broad liberal arts and specialized undergraduate degrees to graduate programs that focus on professional fields and research. One commonality of missions of metropolitan universities is serving the educational needs of the communities in which they are located and the citizens of those communities. Teaching, research, and service to the community are mainstays of most university cultures and the vehicles through which universities fulfill their missions.

Soul-searching is taking place on campuses regarding the use of various technologies to support teaching and learning to achieve the institutional mission. This issue of the Metropolitan Universities Journal brings into focus some of the questions and issues that administrators on campuses across the country are addressing concerning the role of technology in distance learning and distributed learning.

## **Definition of Distributed Learning**

In this article, I am using the definition of distributed learning as determined by Saltzberg and Polyson (1995) in *Syllabus Magazine*:

Distributed learning is not just a new term to replace that other “DL,” distance learning. Rather, it comes from the concept of distributed resources... Distributed learning is an instructional model that allows instructor, students, and content to be located in different, non-centralized locations so that instruction and learning occur independent of time and place. The distributed learning model can be used in combination with traditional classroom-based courses, with traditional distance learning courses, or it can be used to create wholly virtual classrooms.

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The focus of this definition is on learners' ability to access content, faculty, external experts, and other students independent of time and place "distributed resources" for learning. Implied in the distributed learning model is that technology provides the vehicles enabling both synchronous and asynchronous interaction. While distance education relates to instances where the instructor and students are in different locations, distributed learning includes distance education, face-to-face instruction, and combinations of contact and distance education. Thus, distributed learning so defined is the topic addressed in this issue of the *Metropolitan Universities Journal*.

### **Decentralization or Institutionalization**

Some administrators who have allowed distributed learning to become part of their institution's instructional activities use a completely decentralized approach, allowing individual faculty members to choose and implement various modalities of distributed learning courses. This is most frequently accomplished through the provision of hardware and software to faculty. While this approach may result in some high quality instructional materials and improved access for some students, it is difficult to scale, is unlikely to result in systemic institutional change, and effectiveness is difficult to measure.

At the other end of the continuum, other administrators have chosen to institutionalize distributed learning through planning and implementation efforts that involve the entire university. These administrators have established systematic structures to support student access to instruction and services, delivery of instruction, faculty development, course development, and an evaluation program that guides continuous improvement. This type of effort requires the input and involvement from all levels of the institution to achieve widespread use and adoption of distributed learning.

What motivates university administrators to take these different approaches to distributed learning? The question of whether to use distributed learning and how to implement it should be answered in the university's mission and strategic plan that guide the institution toward fulfillment of its goals and mission.

### **Is Competition Driving Distributed Learning Adoption?**

External forces such as competition have prompted some institutions to decide to engage in distributed learning in a systematic way. But what do you consider your institution's competition? Is it the growing presence of niche market and distance learning institutions?

Some private entrepreneurial universities have clearly defined the market they serve as working adults who would benefit in the workplace from gaining a university degree. Are those the same learners your institution is currently trying to attract to certificate and degree programs? These private entrepreneurial universities focus their degree programs, campus locations, course schedules, and learner support on this adult learner population. Are these institutions in your community? Do you consider them the competition? We often think of these types of institutions as the primary competition to metropolitan universities, but with the growing use of the Internet-based degree programs offered by all types of universities around the world, I suggest that competition should be considered more broadly. Administrators' and faculties' understanding of the demographics of the student population, their ability to clarify the institution's mission,

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define strategies for fulfilling institutional goals, meet challenges, and serve learners are critical.

### **Questions regarding Institutional Distributed Learning Readiness**

Whether your institution is planning to use distributed learning for the enhancement of campus-based instruction, outreach, or both, there are critical questions that must be addressed by administrators and faculty. The following questions should be discussed and answered before making a decision on the role of distributed learning at your institution.

- **Institutional goals and plans** — Does the institution have a strategic plan that could guide the selection and development of programs for distributed learning delivery? Is there a history of technology use that could be used as a guide to planning? Are we going to embrace distributed learning or carefully study it? Or both? Why are we doing this? To grow enrollment? To ease campus overcrowding? Will the effort to develop distributed learning be of benefit to the whole institution and all students or only to a small segment of the student population?
- **Infrastructure and costs** — Do we have the financial resources to accomplish our goals? Must we look for external funding? Do we have the technical infrastructure needed for the type of delivery we want to use? Are we prepared to keep up with changing technologies? Will one technology be selected and used at the exclusion of others? Will any infrastructure or development activities be outsourced?
- **Faculty issues** — Are our faculty prepared to teach in the new environment? How will we provide support and training for faculty? What will constitute a faculty load in the new teaching environment? How will faculty be compensated and given time for course and program development? Are faculty tenure and promotion going to be affected by involvement in distributed learning?
- **Policies** — Does the institution have an intellectual property policy? Does it apply to the new teaching environment(s)? Will institutional or program accreditation be affected by the implementation of distributed learning?

Because institutional resources are generally limited, faculty and administrators should also address the following questions when a distributed learning course or program is proposed for development. The answers to these and other questions may well serve to guide institutional planning and to determine priority program development as well as the provision of institutional support.

- *Who is to be served and why?* Are the persons to be served current students or previously unserved or underserved populations? Why should these persons be served? Are they persons who could not otherwise take this course or who would prefer the convenience of taking a course via a distributed learning technology?
- *What are the learner characteristics?* Are they nontraditional college students who are working full-time? Are they adult students? Are they persons with disabilities? In what technologies do they have skills to use and access? Are they interested in taking only an individual course, or are they seeking an undergraduate or graduate degree or certificate?
- *Where are the learners to be served?* Are they on campus, in the metropolitan area served by the university, scattered throughout the state, or are they beyond state lines?
- *What are the expected enrollments?* What is the expectation for course enrollment during the first three years of implementation?
- *What is the best method to reach these learners and provide them access?* Taking

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into consideration the identified characteristics of learners, what delivery modality would best provide the access they need? What media would be appropriate for the course or program? Should a combination of media and face-to-face instruction be used to provide the best educational experience for the learners and to deliver the course or program content to these learners?

- *What timeframe is needed to develop the course(s) or program?* Adequate time and staff is needed to develop new instructional materials and prepare them for distributed delivery. A planning calendar should delineate the time allocated to course development and to initial delivery of the course. Time for faculty development must be scheduled as well.
- *How will marketing of the distributed learning course or program be done?* What materials will be developed and how will they be disseminated?
- *What are the personnel requirements for teaching the course?* Is a graduate or undergraduate teaching assistant needed in addition to the faculty? If so, does the student assistant have to be from the same discipline or major? Will the course be team-taught by teaching assistants and faculty or by two faculty members?
- *Will there be enrollment limits?* What enrollment figures would be acceptable for normal distributed learning delivery? What happens if enrollment exceeds expectations? Will the load be doubled? Will additional student assistant help be provided? Will additional sections be opened?

## **Strategies for Metropolitan Universities**

The articles in this issue focus on different topics and the strategies several institutions have implemented to address institutional challenges and goals. Planned uses of technology and systematic implementation of distributed learning are constants at each institution. Most important is that these institutions recognize the diversity in their student population and strive to meet the needs of learners.

In one article, Anne Moore shares how Virginia Tech University developed an on-campus technology-rich learning center where students take a more active role in their study of mathematics, where faculty roles are changed, and where varied instructional options were developed to meet student needs. While Virginia Tech is not a metropolitan university, the Math Emporium concept is one that could well serve nontraditional students enrolled in any metropolitan university.

Barbara Emil's article discusses distance learning as a strategy for student access to education at a large research-oriented metropolitan university. Student populations served by metropolitan universities are very often nontraditional and look very much like a typical distance learner. The University of South Florida is using varied distributed learning modalities to provide outreach to nontraditional learners in the Tampa Bay area and beyond.

Amy Warner describes the development of outreach teaching centers combined with the use of technology at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. Outreach with a physical presence as well as through technology is a way of connecting with the employment community and learners in central Indiana.

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The development of online courses and programs requires a great deal of support. Ray Schroeder addresses issues surrounding the infrastructure needed to support online courses. He describes infrastructure needs related to information technology, faculty support and training, and learner support.

Charles Dziuban and Patsy Moskal describe how evaluation of distributed learning at the University of Central Florida has yielded data and information that are used for improvement of an institution-wide distributed learning initiative. Their research includes student and faculty demographics, perceptions, strategies for success, student success and withdrawal rates, and student learning styles.

## **Summary**

There are many reasons for metropolitan universities to become involved in distributed learning, and many questions that must be answered as institutions decide how to implement their programs. It is clear, however, that several conditions must exist for successful distributed learning implementation. Institutions must have:

- A vision for the institution and a strategic plan to achieve it;
- A faculty development program to provide the needed pedagogical and technical skills and support for faculty to become comfortable teaching with technology;
- Institution-wide student support services accessible from a distance as well as on campus;
- Technical and personnel infrastructures needed for development and sustained growth of distributed learning; and
- A systematic evaluation program that guides continuous institution-wide program improvement.

The intent of this issue is to provoke thoughtful discussions on the employment of distributed learning at metropolitan universities. The following articles provide content for those discussions.

## ***Author Information***

Steven Sorg is Assistant Vice President and Director of the Center for Distributed Learning at the University of Central Florida. The Center provides faculty and program development support, marketing, facilitates learner support, and leadership for accreditation for distributed learning.

Steven E. Sorg, Ph.D., Assistant Vice President/Director  
Center for Distributed Learning  
University of Central Florida  
12424 Research Parkway, Suite 264  
Orlando, Florida 32826-3271  
Telephone: 407-207-4913  
Fax: 407-207-4911  
Email: sorg@mail.ucf.edu