White Paper: Distance Education at Creighton University

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Introduction

Distance education is not new. In the early days it ran the continuum from fraudulent mail order programs, to issuance of authentic degrees. An early example of a legitimate successful program was the Open University in the United Kingdom. This university offered quality college degree programs using a combination of local, small groups and materials shipped through the postal system to individual students. Students never stepped on the granting institution’s campus. Content was provided by the institution, completed by students at their homes, and later returned to the institution for grading. There was little or no contact with other persons taking the course, or with faculty. This model contributed to the perception that distance education was superficial, occurred in isolation (from a student perspective), and was a generic “one size fits all” type of education, that was woefully inferior to a traditional, on-site education. Fortunately, this monolith of dogma is crumbling in the light of reason and evidence.

So, years later, how is the old perception changing? Distance education is well on the way to becoming mainstream in higher education, enjoying significant success as the early adopters have experimented and shared lessons learned. Additionally, significant societal and technological changes have allowed distance education to become a robust, rich, flexible, and successful learning environment that fits into the daily lives of today’s diverse students. This transition required tenacity, vision and leadership to make it happen.

Jesuits have often led the way in higher education. This leadership continues, and is reflected by the comment of the 34th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus and Father Schlegel’s 2006 Founder’s Day Convocation address which stated:

“Jesuits are never content with the status quo, the known, the tried, the already existing. We are constantly driven to discover, redefine and reach out for the Magis (the more). For us, frontiers and boundaries are not obstacles or ends, but new challenges to be faced, new opportunities to be welcomed. Indeed, ours is a holy boldness and a certain apostolic aggressiveness...” (General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, 2006).

Father Schlegel spoke of the challenges specific to Creighton University and the importance of exploring the boundaries of innovative education as an avenue to ensure the future of this institution.

“E-learning and other innovative approaches should be mandated as we address the vulnerability of science education, the diminishment of the humanities, and a renewed interest in languages that have strategic, commercial and cultural intent.” (Schlegel, 2006)

As a Jesuit institution whose objective is to “prepare students for the world of tomorrow” (Schlegel, 2003), the question for Creighton University today is not whether we should engage in distance education, but when and how it should be implemented across our campus. In this paper we will take a closer look at the factors driving distance education both in general and at Creighton University in particular. We will present a treatise as to why Creighton should become involved in distance education now. Finally, a broad overview of what would be required for a Creighton University Distance Education initiative will be presented.

Factors Driving Distance Education

Being facile with technology, i.e. knowing how to use it to one’s advantage, are essential skill sets for the world in which our students will live and work. In the last five years the K-12 educational system has made significant progress integrating technological tools, concepts, and courses into their curriculums. Higher education must continue this momentum. Distance education directly
supports a student's continued growth in the use of technology for learning. Additionally, it prepares the student to effectively use workplace technologies by coupling learning content with learning how to use the underlying technological delivery system. Over time, this dual education can provide enormous advantages to what would otherwise be a traditional education.

We are in the “information age”. The manner in which people learn, work, and interact has changed – driven by an ever-accelerating technology. For example, the number of homes with an internet connected computer has more than tripled since 1997 (Rosen, 2005). While these changes are often challenging for many of us already in the work force, they are the norm for our current students. Today’s college students have been referred to as the “Millennials.” They have grown up with technology integrated into virtually all aspects of their lives. While it seems every generation is ‘different’, these Millennials truly are. According to Raines (2003);

“They’re the hottest commodity on the job market since Rosie the Riveter. They’re sociable, optimistic, talented, well-educated, collaborative, open-minded, influential, and achievement-oriented. They’ve always felt sought after, needed, indispensable. They are arriving in the workplace with higher expectations than any generation before them—and they’re so well connected that, if an employer doesn’t match those expectations, they can tell thousands of their cohorts with one click of the mouse. They’re the Millennial Generation. Born between 1980 and 2000, they’re a generation nearly as large as the Baby Boom, and they’re charged with potential.”

Millennials are highly connected, collaborative, very service-oriented (remember, they were raised by the baby boomers with their social agendas), and view education as highly desirable. These students consider the Internet as not isolating, but social and connecting. The success of social computing sites such as FaceBook and MySpace, each hosting millions of persons a day, reflect their comfort and even desire for online interaction. Distance education offers our Millennial students an educational environment that fits with the way in which they live and learn.

The fast pace of technological change, the demand for anytime/anywhere learning, and the increased reliability of technology, have fueled the growth of distance education. While distance education has been around for decades -- with technology no more sophisticated then standard mail, it has now made significant strides forward as technologies have advanced and access to the internet has expanded. The embryonic stage of technology-enabled distance education in universities has past. In 2006, one could state that the ‘late majority’ is now considering including distance education in their portfolio of educational services. Creighton's visionary leadership placed it boldly in the ‘early minority’ of distance education. We now propose Creighton expand its success by providing a broader range of distance education services.

**Distance Education at Creighton University**

It is no understatement to claim that it’s critical Creighton University expand its distance education offerings. To not do so ignores a viable avenue to address the decreasing numbers of potential students from traditional feeder states. To not do so – we pass up an opportunity to address issues related to educational affordability and access, and risk graduating students ill prepared to effectively use technology to accomplish work related activities. As a Jesuit institution we have a unique opportunity to lead the development of distance education infused with Ignatian values. Bold explorers leave the comfort and security of the “known world”. Creighton has already ventured successfully into innovative distance-learning initiatives.

With successful models of academically rigorous programs in Nursing and Pharmacy, Occupational Therapy, and Physical Therapy, we have a scalable infrastructure already in place. We are now presented with the opportunity to be the nationally recognized leader in the provision of quality distance education -- grounded in the tenets of sound pedagogy, infused with Ignatian values, centered on service to students and our disciplines, committed to building effective
learning communities and delivered through leading edge technology. We can achieve this vision only through collaboration of faculty and administrators across the University. We can, and should, engage in the facilitation of learning for students at a distance, while pursuing scholarship of distance learning, teaching and assessment to showcase our advancements and achievements.

Over the course of the last eight years the distance programs currently on campus have graduated successful health care professionals. Data collected from faculty and students indicate these students have as much or more interaction with faculty. Some faculty may know their distance students as well as or better than, their campus students. This demonstrates quality distance education programs can still maintain a quality component that Creighton students identify as being extremely important -- interaction with faculty (Scratchfield, 2000). In addition, the maintenance of academic rigor is demonstrated by Pharmacy students’ performance on the North American Pharmacist Licensure Examination, the national board exam for the practice of Pharmacy. Score results show distance students performed as well as or better than the campus students. These health sciences programs have laid the groundwork for Creighton University’s dynamic growth in the distance education arena.

Distance education will allow Creighton to extend its mission of outreach by bringing its unique brand of Jesuit higher education to a wider audience that might not otherwise have access. It will allow Creighton to extend its quality education offerings, imbued with the concepts of ethics, justice, and service to people in remote areas, underserved areas, or to those who lack resources but not the desire for such an education. Distance education is an avenue for Creighton to address the challenge articulated by Father in his 2006 Founder’s Day address; to “be attentive to the issues of access and affordability.” By developing additional educational programs to be offered to distance students, we can reach out to students in underserved areas, while not burdening them and their families with the additional expense associated with being a traditional campus student. Additionally, developing distance education programs at Creighton is a means to address the declining pool of potential students from traditional feeder states. Not only will this allow us to offer distance education programs and courses to students throughout the United States and eventually beyond, but it also provides the University with a pool of potential students that can bring the diversity of culture, ethnicity, age, race, and background to the educational experience that Creighton seeks. We have been blessed by having the right tools, the right talent, at the right place, at the right time, to actually make this a reality.

Many of the Jesuit colleges and universities in the United States currently offer distance education courses in a variety of disciplines. However, a review of the course descriptions (JesuitNet, 2006) indicate few, if any, of the courses explicitly include Ignatian values as a foundation. Since these courses are offered by Jesuit institutions we could assume Ignatian values are embedded within the courses. However, Creighton has an opportunity to develop distance courses and programs in which Ignatian values are an explicit component. The presence of Ignatian values in Creighton’s distance courses would be very apparent to all potential students. Faculty preparing to teach distance courses would be educated in strategies for embedding these values within their courses. The work of Creighton’s Department of Education in assessing students’ values can be used to develop tools for measuring the impact of Ignatian values infused distance courses and programs on enrolled students. The ability to further capture distance students’ understanding and embracing of Ignatian values is made possible by the electronic values portfolio developed by the College of Business Administration. This tool allows students to document growth in their understanding of the application of values in today’s business environment. As one of only two colleges in the United States using an electronic values portfolio, COBA presents a model faculty and students can use to relate individual student experiences dealing with values across the disciplines. Creighton University’s current distance program in pharmacy has demonstrated the delivery of education to students at a distance can embrace the Ignatian values and identity. Graduate survey data reveals the web-based pharmacy students understand and embrace Ignatian values to a greater degree than their
campus counterparts. We have the chance to be the leader in this area, not wait for others to do so and then wonder ‘why didn’t we think of that?’

Distance education also provides Creighton a way to remain engaged with alumni. In today’s world, learning is a life-long activity. As such, distance education provides a way for alums to stay connected with Creighton. They may take new courses, even if they have moved out of the area. This audience sought out Creighton once, and so might be interested in later courses. For example, in a distance education course currently being developed in the College of Business Administration, Creighton alumni outside of the Omaha area will be interviewed via telephone about business topics under study in the course. The interviews will be turned into audio files, which will then be podcast to the students. Students will listen to them on MP3 players or on their computers, then discuss the interviews and the points made online with the guest interviewee, each other, and the faculty member. This model not only brings real-life experiences to the classroom, but does it with people that would not be able to attend a class as a traditional guest lecturer. In this model, interviewees can be from anywhere in the world. Imagine a Creighton student interviewing a Creighton alumni astronaut. The opportunities these new technologies present are exciting and limitless.

Distance Education at Creighton University – Support and Resources

To ensure distance education at Creighton University is of the highest caliber, infused with Ignatian values, and consistent with our on-ground offerings, the office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs must create a centralized structure of the University’s non-health sciences quality assurance, course development and faculty development activities related to distance education. The current health sciences distance education infrastructure in the School of Pharmacy and Health Professions will serve well as a model for this development. Reconstituting the University Distance Education Committee will provide a formalized vehicle for Schools and Colleges to collaborate in the development of this structure. Additionally, this Committee can work with DoIT to ensure the network and technical support infrastructure necessary to support distance education is in place.

The functions of Academic Affairs’ Office of Academic Excellence and Assessment (AEA) already include quality assurance and faculty development activities. By expanding the Office to include a team for supporting the design and development of distance education, we take advantage of this successful structure already in place. A team of instructional designers, a graphic artist and educational technology specialists led by an Executive Director for Distance Education would report to the Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs. In addition to leading the distance education development team, the Executive Director would collaborate with the Deans to explore opportunities for distance education development, work with student services personnel to identity structures needed for distance students, and serve as the liaison between DoIT and the Distance Education Committee to provide oversight on progress of acquisition and implementation of hardware and software related to distance education offerings.

Much of the infrastructure for delivery of student services and technology support for distance education is already in place. Online access to library resources and the bookstore currently exist. Although distance students have online access to be able to register for courses and view their financial aid information, access to other Registrar and Financial Aid functions and services must be made available as distance education at Creighton grows. The creation of process and structures to provide distance students access to academic advising, grievance procedures, student support services, residence life, opportunities to be involved with campus organizations, and counseling services can be modeled after the SPAHP framework. The Blackboard course management system currently used by faculty provides a vehicle for hosting course materials, tools for synchronous and asynchronous communication, and delivery of low stakes assessment of student learning. Hardware and software for delivery of multimedia course components including audio and video already exist. Initializing distance education in the Academic Affairs
area would require the acquisition of software for creation and delivery of high stakes, secure, reliable online assessment of student learning.

**Conclusion**

Creighton University faces several serious challenges including the shrinking pool of prospective students from traditional feeder states, maintaining affordable access to higher education, and preparation of students to encounter technologies in the contemporary workplace. Expanding distance education offerings will address these issues. Using the successful models and infrastructure in existence in the health sciences, specifically in the School of Pharmacy and Health Professions, Creighton is poised to be the leader in the development of high quality distance education based on Ignatian values.
References

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