

**Distance Learning Forum**  
**Sponsored by the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia**  
**June 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1998**

**Keynote Speaker**

**Executive Summary**

Dr. Durden provided the Distance Learning Forum a comprehensive look at the possibilities, considerations, and obstacles related to implementing an effective program of distance learning in the Commonwealth. He had several inter-related major points that were well-presented and relevant to Virginia's efforts.

Dr. Durden first stated that the current emphasis on technology conceals the real issue of distance education: how to provide a learning environment that meets the interactive needs of people. Virginia's institutions need to keep this question uppermost in their minds as they consider distance learning opportunities.

A second challenge to distance learning is that the "culture" of higher education is not prepared to deal with what is required to create successful distance learning programs. Until universities "clean house" of old attitudes and inadequate management structures, he said, they will "marginalize" distance learning in a misguided attempt to protect their traditional approaches. Cooperation, according to Dr. Durden, is not extensively practiced within academia.

Dr. Durden's perspective on the climate in which distance learning issues are arising is that there are many mutual suspicions between academia and the business community. Business sees income opportunity in providing graduate and adult work skills education—but not in undergraduate education. Dr. Durden said that the efforts by the state and academia to protect their traditional approaches in these areas cannot succeed in the face of free-market pressures.

There are also areas of legitimate concern for faculty about distance learning, particularly for those called upon to develop programs. These include how faculty are rewarded for their efforts, and what happens to the intellectual property rights that are involved in distance learning.

In the end, there are appropriate roles for both for-profit and not-for-profit organizations in the new world of distance learning. Specifically Dr. Durden said the for-profit sector is better positioned to handle distribution and marketing while not-for-profit higher education institutions are best at content development and management. As an example of how business is dealing with distance learning opportunities, Dr. Durden described the efforts of his firm, Caliber Learning Network.

As a conclusion, Dr. Durden provided seven concrete steps for the Commonwealth to take in preparing effective distance learning programs for its citizens. These steps are modeled after the approaches studied and taken by the University of Pennsylvania.

**Dr. William G. Durden**  
**President, Sylvan Academy of Sylvan Learning System, Inc.**  
**Vice President for Academic Affairs of the Caliber Learning Network**

After opening with several introductory stories, Dr. Durden began his presentation by stating that technology is not the real issue in distance learning. Studies are showing that the important variables in any learning environment are the quality of content and the amount of human interaction the environment enables. Technology, he said, should be an invisible component of any learning environment.

Dr. Durden said that the emergence of distance learning requires academia to take a hard look at its culture. Many of the issues distance learning raises simply cannot be solved in the current culture of the academy. He said that academia has tried to deal with issues similar to distance learning in the past and has failed. For instance, the inability of the academic community to resolve basic financial issues with the “junior year abroad” program is indicative of the problems that will result if distance learning issues are approached in the same manner. In sum, he maintained that issues totally unrelated to technology and distance learning must be resolved before tackling those areas.

Before delving into the intricacies of distance learning issues, Dr. Durden presented a generally accepted picture of what distance learning is all about. It is the use of technology as the substitute for local live classroom education, whether by e-mail, the use of the web, using other computer-based approaches, satellite transmission of programs, or using cable video conferencing. New approaches to distance learning are mostly location and student independent, and usually asynchronous. They are based on the assumption that consumers want “anytime, anywhere” educational opportunities.

However, Dr. Durden challenged this assumption. He said people have an affinity for being around other people and are not enthusiastic about involving themselves in a learning environment that is by its very nature a lonely experience. He said we may be headed towards a backlash to computer terminal based learning environments.

Dr. Durden next indicated that one of the problems in the current environment of policy making about distance education is the inability to ask the right question. The wrong question—most often addressed in policy discussion—is “what are the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning?” The right question, on the other hand, is “when is distance learning an appropriate vehicle for meeting educational objectives?”

It is a pedagogical issue, said Dr. Durden, not technological. The point will be constantly missed if technology is put at the front of the line in distance learning

considerations. However, if institutions ask the right question it will drive them to self-reflection and force them to make intelligent decisions about using distance learning.

As an aside, Dr. Durden noted that all the discussions about cooperation among institutions are rather humorous from his perspective. Going back to his point about the nature of the academic culture, he pointed out that cooperation is not a part of that culture. It is foolish, he observed, to think that just by saying the word “cooperation” that it will happen. Distance learning in and of itself does not change the culture

If distance learning is the correct pedagogical answer, then the question becomes what is the best way to implement a program. The resulting self-examination should answer questions of whether such a program is complementary to, competing with, or instead of the classroom.

However, too often the answer is “technocentric,” pushing everything to fit the technology. “We don’t even know when or how to use the Internet well,” he said for instance, “but people are quick to jump on the bandwagon before it is thoroughly understood.”

Dr. Durden continued on the subject of the questions that institutions need to answer before determining the appropriateness of a distance learning solution. They include:

- How does a student learn best?
- How does interaction contribute to learning and how necessary is it?
- What value does the environment or learning style play in educational outcomes?
- How are colleges and universities best organized to support or absorb distance learning?

Dr. Durden urged—for what would be the first of many times in his presentation—that a separate degree-granting structure (i.e., a virtual university) not be created at this point in distance education’s development in Virginia. He said that such an effort would allow the institutions to avoid answering the cultural questions that need answering for distance learning to work at any level.

He then provided a suggested approach that each institution follow when distance learning is deemed appropriate for the circumstances. The elements of his approach include:

- For each course or program, define the educational objectives and priorities;
- Utilize tools that maximize objectives;
- Systematically market the objectives and show how the delivery mechanism meets the objectives;
- Measure the results; too much is already occurring in distance education without evaluation.

Dr. Durden closed this portion of his presentation with a strong exhortation concerning having a love affair with the technology of the day: “If you don’t know where you’re going, technology will only get you there faster.”

### *Provost's Report on Distance learning at the University of Pennsylvania*

Dr. Durden recommended that the conference's participants obtain the April 24, 1998, University of Pennsylvania Almanac Supplement concerning distance learning at that institution. According to Dr. Durden, the Penn report clearly lays out the questions to be resolved and an intelligent approach to distance learning that could serve as a model for both individual institutions and the state as a whole. The questions the report addresses include:

- What technologies work, and how will they differ across programs in the university?
- What types of infrastructure will be needed to support distance learning programs to ensure their success?
- How will distance learning collaborations be structured?
- What types of courses should be developed?

Here Dr. Durden paused to convey a point he thought especially important to the participants. He stated that business would not touch undergraduate education; there was simply no money to be made. If those gathered felt that their future in distance learning was developing undergraduate programs, their institutions might find themselves in financial trouble.

Having made this point he returned to the questions identified in the Penn report:

- What standards will guide admissions to any given program? Will distance learning suffer the same fate as "continuing education" and operate under different standards than campus-based programs? If so, the core faculty will come to ridicule those involved in distance learning programs, just the same way as they do those involved in continuing education.
- How will faculty be chosen, paid, and given incentives to participate in distance learning program development? In other words, what will be in it for them if only research and teaching expertise define pay raises?
- Who will monitor the quality of programs to ensure the standards and reputation of the university are upheld?

### *Durden's Perspective on the Context in which Distance Learning Issues Exist*

Dr. Durden gave a brief history of his background in preparing to provide his personal views on what's going on with distance learning at the present time. In short, he took a small academic center at Johns Hopkins University to a larger scale and profitability for the university. He said that he maintained a business perspective and pressed JHU at every turn to think entrepreneurially. Now he is in the private sector working with distance learning as a for-profit concept.

With that understanding of where he comes from as background, he noted three themes he sees over and over in his efforts:

- 1) The constant tension between business and the academic world.
  - Business views the academic world with great suspicion. It sees the universities as bureaucratic, involving painfully slow decision making processes, having administrators without authority, having faculties with too much decision-making authority, having too many committees, persistently and inappropriately mistaking inefficiency with the moral high-ground, having no incentives for risk-taking or making changes, populated by fiefdoms, and offering few incentives for workers.
  - The academic world views business as holding the moral low-ground, involving unreflective decision making, and constantly choosing profit over integrity. In short, business has but one goal: make money.
  - In response to this one goal of business Dr. Durden challenged the academic world to come up with its one goal. At least having one common goal brings about cooperation asserted Dr. Durden. “If my colleague does well, I do well.”
  - The result of these mutually incompatible views is an inevitable suspicion between these two components underlying efforts in distance learning and the use of technology. This, Dr. Durden asserted, is a basic disposition that needs effort to correct if the two are ever to work together.
  
- 2) Technological versus minimal- or even non-technological approaches to education.
  - Is the current technology truly sophisticated and accessible enough for supporting a sustained educational program? The technology is apparently good enough for certain types of informational conveyance and for certain training applications, but there is little evidence to support its appropriateness to effectively present full degree programs.
  - Can technology convey a sense of learning space with room for human affinities? Humans need humans. The isolation of a totally Internet program, for instance, will not provide fulfillment to this need.
  - Can technology handle secure student assessment? Can it handle inquiry beyond simple true/false analysis? Dr. Durden feels that the answer to these questions is that technology is not there yet.
  - Another technology question he encounters frequently is whether a university can put together an adequate basic support system for a sophisticated, technologically-based learning system. He noted that the greatest fear of faculty is working with their institution’s audio-visual equipment and staff; the constant worry is that the support won’t be there. He further noted that it is perhaps an issue for Virginia to look into at the state level as to how to keep competent people at the institutions to provide such support.
  - Finally, he frequently encounters the issue of how can institutions afford to constantly replace, maintain, and repair expensive technology that is forever changing.

- 3) Distance learning versus live, residentially-based instruction.
- Should a university be in the business of broadcasting its content to a mass market?
  - Can a university actually make money through using distance learning? Very few enterprises are actually making money when all costs are considered, and they are usually private sector operations with a lot of capital behind them. Institutions that jump on the distance learning bandwagon may find they are putting themselves into deep financial trouble...and taking their state with them.

### *Faculty Fears Concerning Distance Learning*

Faculties have expressed many fears and questions concerning the impact of distance learning on the academy. Many of these fears and questions are legitimate. They include:

- The fear that all is needed is one star in any discipline within an institution, and the rest of that discipline's faculty will be relegated to mere teaching assistant status. This applies on the national level as well, where it is feasible that a small set of academic stars could become the main instructors for millions of students in any given discipline, relegating large numbers of faculty to an assisting role.
- The fear of losing control of intellectual property as the institutions use professors' efforts as their own products to sell in new distance learning markets.
- Won't distance learning efforts at any given institution dilute that's institution's brand name and consumer image?
- If institutions decide to use distance learning approaches, what is an appropriate reward structure for faculty that engage in its development?
- What are the professional incentives for faculty to utilize others' distance learning offerings in their courses? This question relates to the cultural difficulties the academy will constantly have with distance learning, primarily in this case the unwillingness to accept anything that isn't developed in-house or by one's self. For distance learning to work, there has to be a willingness to receive as well as broadcast courses and programs.
- How should the institutions award academic credit in distance learning cases? This question applies to courses taken across institutions and to courses that exist within an institution in both residential and distance learning formats. Dr. Durden insists that distance learning must not be marginalized by making courses in that format count for less than the same courses in the residential format.

*Dr. Durden's Suggested Differing Roles for Profit and Not-for-Profit Organizations*

Dr. Durden said that the for-profit institutions and the not-for-profit institutions bring differing strengths to the field of distance learning, strengths that can be combined to synergistic effect. Specifically, he said that for-profit operations can handle the following functions better than not-for-profit organizations:

- Distribution;
- Marketing;
- Implementing the technological infrastructure for producing distance learning programs;
- Dealing with the production issues that different media present to distance learning program development.

For the non-profits, he said they should more appropriately handle the following:

- The academic content (and institutions should alertly guard their rights involved with it);
- The hiring, firing, and review of instructors;
- The provision of academic assessment;
- The provision of library resources, without which any distance learning program will be uselessly shallow.

Dr. Durden at this point offered the outlook of his own company, Caliber Learning Network, as an example of what a sophisticated private sector company is seeing and pursuing as opportunity in the distance learning field.

Caliber believes that its distinctive advantage in the marketplace is in distribution. Its mission, therefore, is to be the world's leading provider of worker development services for adults and leading corporations.

One-half of Caliber's current efforts is identifying and putting under contract the top 25 graduate certificate and degree programs among U.S. universities. While some commentators suggest that the premiere institutions will not want their core delivered through distance learning efforts, Caliber is not experiencing such opposition. Caliber has identified specific market foci, and has already contracted with several major institutions to support their efforts with these foci. They include:

- Health Care: primarily handled by Johns Hopkins University;
- Business: primarily handled by the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania;
- Teaching: primarily handled by Teachers College at Columbia University;
- Information Technology: primarily handled by University of California at Berkeley and by Carnegie-Mellon Institute.

Caliber and these institutions are designing courses in the given marketing areas that use mixes of traditional location, computer, satellite, and Internet-based instruction. Dr. Durden mentioned that he and Caliber feel that none of these approaches is sufficient

alone; they must be integrated to provide the advantages of the best possible learning environment.

Dr. Durden noted at this point that each University has to ask itself what content it has that is so valuable and so distinguished that it will sell in a highly competitive marketplace. He said this is a core element in each institution's self-assessment of why it should involve itself in any distance learning endeavor, whether it involves the reception or generation of courses and programs.

Dr. Durden concluded this portion of his presentation by showing a short film on how Caliber conducts its instructional efforts.

### *Issues that the State of Virginia Specifically Must Address*

Dr. Durden's biggest fear for Virginia is that the system will attempt to marginalize distance education. He emphasized that the biggest forces for change in the academic world are coming from without the system and efforts to marginalize distance education will leave the state in a decisively non-competitive position.

These forces give rise to issues with which the Commonwealth must deal. They include:

- The state must resist the tendency of the higher education community to dismiss distance learning as no more substantial than it has held continuing education. According to Dr. Durden, Virginia has "ripped off" citizens by not giving them the core of the state's educational institutions' knowledge in their continuing education programs.
- The advent of distance learning forces the Commonwealth's institutions to confront the role of technology, entrepreneurship, the rise of for-profit educational ventures, and—indeed—even the role of the traditional campus. The institutions should use the opportunity to look at these elements very carefully and make some thoughtful changes to adapt to them.
- Does the existence of the traditional departmental structure and of faculty tenure make any sense in the new environment of higher education?

In light of the forces at play and the issues to which they give rise, Dr. Durden next outlined what he thought the state should do regarding distance learning. He was emphatic in discouraging the state from starting a full-scale, degree-granting "virtual university." He felt the individual institutions must be forced to deal with the cultural and other issues he had mentioned before anything was done to create a large-scale virtual effort. He urged the assembled group not to get their heads turned by efforts in other states and region-wide efforts to create virtual universities, stating that they may be rushing to capitalize on the promise of technology without first creating the proper infrastructure.

He suggested that policy makers look at the model of a virtual university adopted by the state of Michigan, which does not give any degrees or certificates of its own. Michigan views its virtual university as a broker, connecting the offerings of its constituent institutions with the needs of local industry.

As for concrete steps the state should take at this stage, Dr. Durden felt that there should be a mix of competition, cooperation, and state assistance during these early days of the new environment of distance learning. He specifically suggested the state do the following:

- 1) Create a venture capital fund to provide resources for specific, larger-scale efforts that an individual institution or group of institutions might undertake;
- 2) Provide legal and contract assistance through the Attorney General's Office to the institutions in their dealings with outside providers and customers;
- 3) Ensure that barriers to in-state and out-of-state competition are not artificially preserved;
- 4) Provide research funds to the individual institutions to study the major issues surrounding distance learning, particularly how to evaluate student performance and determining the best technological/pedagogical approaches for distance learning;
- 5) Support accreditation of distance learning programs through certification with acknowledged bodies;
- 6) Provide information to consumers on what distance learning opportunities exist within the state;
- 7) Insist that institutions create mature business plans before they seek funds for distance learning.

In short, Dr. Durden said that for all parties involved—the state, the state institutions, and the private institutions—the core issue for distance learning concerns marketing: “will the students come if you build it.” He counseled the institutions to not start building a distance learning program without installing the support infrastructure that is needed for a successful venture. For the state he urged that it not attempt to regulate that which it does not understand. He closed this section by asking the state to give the institutions a “creative space” in order to have a strong basis for a healthy distance learning effort in Virginia.

As an example for the state Dr. Durden cited the experience of the University of Pennsylvania. What Penn did, asserted Dr. Durden, was in a microcosm what Virginia ought to do as a state. Specifically, they:

- Encouraged experimentation in distance learning by each division within the University;
- Established a distance learning capital fund;
- Established a distance learning Information Facilitation Unit that could provide all manner of assistance to the individual divisions in their efforts;
- Monitored contract formulation through the office of the University's attorney;
- Established individual school strategic planning and reporting on distance learning initiatives; and

- Allowed each school to approve, monitor, and facilitate its own distance learning programs.

### *Conclusion*

Dr. Durden offered the following conclusions concerning distance learning:

- 1) It is happening, it is here to stay, and it must be considered part of the core of academia's efforts.
- 2) We have little information on what forms of distance learning will succeed. Don't confuse hype with reality at this point in its development.
- 3) There will be an initial surplus of distance learning programs, but the power of the marketplace will weed out those programs that don't have merit.
- 4) The consumer (students) will ultimately determine distance learning's future. If it ends up offering a learning environment that incorporates the human being's affinity for each other then it will succeed. If it involves only lonely hours in front of a monitor, then it won't make it.
- 5) The state must resist creating a stringent regulatory environment.
- 6) The state must advance the policy of guided experimentation and creativity by the individual institutions, providing the support elements that will allow institutions to position themselves for major competition.
- 7) Higher education must confront the issue of global distance learning. Will American institutions accept courses and programs from other countries, or will we pursue a new era of American educational imperialism?
- 8) Do not marginalize distance learning!

### *Question and Answer Session*

- 1) Dr. James Koch (President of Old Dominion University) noted that ODU is—contrary to Dr. Durden's assertion—making money in using distance learning approaches to providing undergraduate education.

Dr. James Davis (President of Shenandoah University) contested Dr. Koch's assertion, indicating that his figures did not take into account the state's general subsidy of education. Dr. Durden noted that there are many instances where it is appropriate to have a distance learning program that is implemented without any intention of making money. Also he noted that ODU is a leader in its efforts, and that the bold can make things happen when others can't.

- 2) A participant expressed concern on the state's part that costly duplication might occur if the individual institutions are allowed to proceed without any regulation at the state level.

Dr. Durden expressed sympathy with the concern, but indicated that duplication is going to be a necessary evil of the early phase of the new environment for distance learning. The state may be able to control its in-state constituents, but it will have no ability to control out-of-state competitors. Ultimately, said Dr. Durden, the consumer will clear up issues of duplication through their actions in the marketplace. If the state tries to control duplication it will enact regulations that eventually will restrict course development and offerings. The result will be that in-state consumers will go to other states and the private sector to fulfill their needs.

- 3) A participant asked what role the community college system should play in offering distance learning courses and programs.

Dr. Durden replied that the community colleges have an important role to play in distance learning, but it is as of yet undefined. One big issue for the community colleges to resolve is how much of the need to remediate high school students will they involve themselves in, and how can distance learning operate there. In the end, Dr. Durden feels that the community colleges will partner with the high schools and the 4-year institutions in their distance learning efforts, in many cases serving as a bridge between the two.