

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

**Conference Review**

**What is distance learning...and why is there so much interest in it?**

“Distance learning” refers to any effort to educate students beyond the normal paradigm of students and teacher meeting together in a classroom on a campus at a given time. So, technically speaking, there is absolutely nothing new about distance learning. Correspondence courses, off-site continuing education, and satellite-based education—all of which qualify under this definition as distance learning efforts—have been a part of the higher education scene for 40 years or more. However, there is a new approach under the term “distance learning,” and this approach has created a new outlook about the subject.

The approach is education that uses the latest digital and network distribution technologies, the most obvious of which is the Internet. Unlike the other modalities of distance learning that predate it, these technologies allow a student to take courses and programs—even full degree programs—in an asynchronous and location independent manner. Students may no longer be bound to a specific place or a specific time to get together with teachers, and the learning can take place at students’ homes or work place at a time of their choice (for instance, evenings and weekends). One implication of web-based distance learning for institutions of higher education is that it appears possible that more students could be taught by fewer faculty using fewer classrooms.

Financial and demographic pressures are forcing the higher education community to search for alternatives that promise increased system efficiency and cost reduction. These new technologies are in the forefront of such alternatives, and have captivated the interest of many involved in higher education. However, such distance learning approaches raise many issues regarding the quality of education and the real costs involved in implementing them. It was for these reasons that the Council convened a conference on the subject of distance learning.

**The purpose of the Forum**

The following material is taken directly from the program that was sent to all prospective participants in the Forum. It constitutes the stated purpose for the Forum.

“The Council of Higher Education believes the time is right for the Commonwealth to assess its planning and policies for distance education and to explore whether new approaches are needed. The purpose of this forum is to bring together those who should have a voice in the development of state policy on distance education to discuss two critical issues: the ways in which the state can foster collaboration and help manage

competition, and how the state can help ensure that consumers are well-served in this new (distance) learning environment.”

The Forum had several unstated purposes. First, the Council hoped the presentations and discussions would give policy-makers guidance on the relative depth of feeling about issues raised by distance learning. Second, the Council hoped that the Forum would help identify the key players in terms of institutions, individuals, and points-of-view that would play a role in future policy determination. And third, the Council hoped that the Forum would point to possible areas of collaboration among institutions.

### **Who attended the Forum?**

The intention of the Forum’s organizers was to have broad representation of those who have an interest in distance learning. The attendees included:

- The administrators of Virginia’s public institutions (presidents, provosts, board of visitors members, etc.)  
*Interests: Ensure their institutions stay competitive with peers both regionally and nationally in technology and reputation; get an appropriate share of state resources allocated for distance learning; avoid regulation that might hamper distance learning experimental efforts; provide new opportunities for and wider access to learning.*  
**Number in attendance: 30**
- The administrators of Virginia’s private institutions (presidents, provosts, etc.)  
*Interests: Ensure their institutions stay competitive with peers both regionally and nationally; caution the state about underwriting distance learning efforts in a manner that makes the private institutions less competitive with the state institutions; provide new opportunities for and wider access to learning.*  
**Number in attendance: 20**
- Those directly responsible for distance learning technology at institutions  
*Interests: Ensure their institutions have the latest technology available and that the effort of all other parties does not diminish the importance of technology and distance learning at their institutions.*  
**Number in attendance: 30**
- The Council of Higher Education  
*Interests: Make the correct recommendations to the Governor and General Assembly concerning how much of the state’s resources should go towards distance learning and how much the state should regulate the phenomenon; promote cooperation and coordination on the delivery and receipt of distance learning program by public institutions; protect consumers of distance learning.*  
**Number in Attendance: 13**

- Faculty  
*Interests: Job security; ensuring that distance learning programs are pedagogically sound; getting a fair share of the benefits that distance learning may create for the institutions at which they work.*  
**Number in attendance: 3**
- Private sector suppliers of distance learning services  
*Interests: Minimize state regulation, and understand and minimize the prospects of competition from state institutions.*  
**Number in Attendance: 4**
- Elected representatives, legislative staff, and members of the Governor's administration  
*Interests: See that taxpayer investments in higher education result in a reasonable return on investment for the Commonwealth; ensure broad access to a high-quality college education for citizens of the Commonwealth; maximize the use of distance learning as a means to develop the work force and attract and retain business and industry in Virginia.*  
**Number in Attendance: 8**
- Other interested parties (public adult learning centers, private consulting firms, and organizations such as the CIT, VBHEC, VIVA, U.S. DOE, and the Council of Independent Colleges in Virginia)  
*Interests: Varied, but similar to one or another of the above constituencies in most cases.*  
**Number in Attendance: 11**

The Forum's organizers invited—with several mailings to each invitee and follow-up phone calls in many cases—all major public and private institution administrators, all Boards of Visitors members, all legislators from the House of Delegates and the Senate, representatives of the Governor's administration, and representatives from the Virginia Chapter of the American Association of University Professors and the Virginia Faculty Senate.

### **Questions about distance learning and a summary of what was said about them**

From preliminary research and then the Forum itself, the Council identified a variety of questions that need discussion before making policy and resource recommendations. The commentary following each question summarizes the positions and suggestions in evidence at the Forum.

- *Does distance learning actually work?*

It is clear from the success of such programs as Old Dominion University's

Teletechnet that distance learning efforts using older technological approaches such as video are very effective in dealing with certain facets of the demand for non-campus-based education. However, these approaches do not completely free the individual from the time and place requirements in the way web-based distance learning promises.

To date, the emphasis for web-based distance learning has to be on the word “promise.” The participants at the Forum heard from many people—most notably Dr. William Durden of Sylvan Learning, Dr. James Davis of Shenandoah University, Dr. David Potter of George Mason University, and Dr. Karen Spahn of the University of Phoenix—who made it clear that there are drawbacks to web-based education.

Probably the most severe shortcoming in many of the participants’ opinions is related to the very nature of computer-based learning: the individual is alone with a computer and not naturally interacting with others. The sense of community that a traditional college provides—and is considered by many as a vital element in the learning experience for 18-22 year olds—is difficult to create in a purely virtual environment. However, some evidence suggests that human reinforcement and ancillary learning from fellow students become less important for the working adult using distance learning. Also, several participants at the Forum made the case that web-based distance learning represents a different kind of human interaction, which, in their view, can be just as valuable as campus-based relationships.

One interesting aside with web-based courses and programs is that many traditional universities across the country that have implemented such programs are finding that the primary users of them are the students registered for on-campus education. It appears that the availability of web-based courses and programs provides traditional students a greater flexibility in scheduling and allows them to complete programs of study in a convenient manner.

In general, participants of the Forum were left with the sense that web-based distance learning is suitable as an adjunct to the main—campus-based—form of education for the traditionally aged college cohort group(18-22). As the prospective student grows older and more focused on specific educational needs, the ability of web-based distance learning to function as the primary fulfillment of those needs increases.

- *Does distance learning represent a cost savings?*

Distance learning has the potential to reduce demands on facilities and increase the reach of faculty. Also, institutions may be able to produce income from the sale of courses and programs to students who wouldn’t otherwise attend the school, and to other institutions. However, the participants in the Forum heard from many directions that there is more to offering distance learning than simply recording a

class and then transmitting it off-campus. Doing distance learning right involves a heavy investment in technology, faculty time, and support services. As a result, the promise of considerable cost “savings” remains an uncertainty.

On the subject of producing income, those at the Forum were told that programs using web-based and other modes of distance learning are already extensive and growing exponentially. They are coming from both the private and public sectors nation-wide. This is creating an extraordinarily competitive market in which pricing is a critical variable. Panelists explained that very few enterprises in this market are even breaking even, and the nature of the free-market indicates that only those that offer the consumer a unique product or the best price/quality mix will survive. To use technology effectively in instruction requires a significant and ongoing investment, and—if competitive forces continue—it is possible that an institution might not get the additional student and institutional customers that would justify that expense.

- *What is the impact of distance learning on faculty?*

Although there were few faculty at the Forum, their concerns were indirectly raised during the course of the Forum. Faculty have at least three areas of concern. First, for their jobs. As previously mentioned, one of the more controversial justifications for distance learning is its prospect of rendering some portion of faculty redundant. An institution may use one professor to teach many classes through distance learning, or it may purchase courses from another institution, eliminating traditional faculty activities in that manner.

The second concern is that universities and colleges will unjustly earn income off the creative efforts of faculty. Many professors feel that the production of a distance learning course corresponds to the writing of a book. They feel that faculty should receive at least some of the income their institution might earn off selling a course to another organization. Most institutions get around this problem by having faculty sign employment contracts that transfer the right to any income to the institutions. However, many faculty bodies across the country are raising questions about this, and there may be an effort on their part to challenge this practice.

The third concern is for the pedagogy of distance learning. Professors want to ensure that learning is the primary outcome of any teaching effort, and, at present, there is concern that the environment of distance learning may be inappropriate for 18-22 year olds engaging in traditional college education.

- *Should the state attempt to control distance learning program duplication? Should it attempt to control distance learning program provision by any institution anywhere in any way, shape, or form?*

There was substantial agreement among those attending the Forum that the state should avoid regulating distance learning. Participants said that regulatory efforts by the state—whether well-intentioned ones to forestall inefficient program duplication by public institutions or otherwise—would dampen the experimental efforts underway during this critical phase of its growth.

- *Should the state develop an independent virtual university?*

There was general agreement that it is not the appropriate time for the state to create an independent virtual university. Almost all in attendance did see the state offering a set of services just short of providing actual degrees, though, that might fall under the general title of a virtual university. Such an organization could provide consumer information, coordinate course and program development and offerings, provide technical support and consultation for the institutions in developing courses and programs, and perhaps provide some support services for the consumers of distance learning programs. Forum participants said that existing colleges and universities should continue as the only degree-granting entities as far as publicly sponsored virtual education goes at present.

The lone alternative view rose from some representatives of the Virginia Community College System. Given its unique governance and its extensive experience in distance learning, they made the case that it may be more appropriate for the VCCS to establish a separate distance learning college than it would be for the state to create such an entity.

- *In what manner the state fund distance learning efforts?*

There is little doubt that events and trends continue to unfold that allow all educational institutions to incorporate new technologies and to involve themselves in distance learning programs. It thus is important that the state continue to provide funds for technology infrastructure, including both equipment and support functions.

However, beyond that recognition, the actual amount and funding avenues of the needed investment are difficult to determine, and the Forum provided mixed answers on this front. The public institutions already heavily involved in distance learning want the major flow of state funds to go to the continued growth of their efforts. The smaller public institutions, just getting started with distance learning efforts, don't want this "have's having more" syndrome. The private institutions don't want any of the public universities and colleges getting any more of a subsidy for their activities than they already do. To provide funds to public institutions for distance learning efforts seems, to them, to be a subsidy on top of a subsidy, and represents the state unduly assisting the public institutions in the

competitive market for students.

Other discussions at the Forum centered on how to fund distance learning. Several of the more visible efforts in the application of technology and in distance learning development (Teletechnet, for instance) are specifically funded by the state and have a high visibility to anyone examining budgets. However, for the most part the state's institutions incorporate their investments in technology and distance learning in their operational and instructional budgets, and it can be difficult to extract exact information about such investments.

Most in higher education consider distance learning as an element of the on-going process of continuously improving the educational experience. They look at distance learning as simply a better tool, and as such not an exceptional expense requiring special accounting. In spite of this argument, participants felt that the exploration of ways to identify costs specific to distance learning and mechanisms to make appropriate investment in it is an important near-term responsibility for state policy-makers.

- *Should the state provide information on and quality assessments of distance learning programs and courses (given by both in-state/out-of-state, public and private institutions), and if so, how should it accomplish that obligation?*

Many of the Forum's participants called for the Council to perform this function. At present accreditation agencies are struggling with the issue of how to assure that a distance learning program is worthwhile. Until that is resolved, it will be difficult for the Council or any other chosen agency to provide citizens with information on the quality of specific distance learning programs.

- *Are financial aid programs appropriately structured to deal with distance learning students?*

There are still many administrative obstacles to receiving financial aid for students who attempt to pursue degrees through distance learning means. State financial aid requirements key on full-time status for the student, and legitimately chartered and accredited institutions offering the programs. Federal regulations do not allow aid to distance learning students if an institution has over 50 percent of its students involved in correspondence courses, under which definition distance learning is included.

The origins of the federal outlook go back to the misuse of aid by both students engaged in and providers of correspondence education in the last decade, and Congress does not appear ready yet to loosen the purse strings. However, in the upcoming renewal of the Higher Education Act it is likely that there will be "demonstration" programs begun to test the waters of funding financial aid to

students of institutions whose primary educational effort is in the distance learning arena.

- *In what way should colleges and universities actively compete with the private educational providers of distance learning? Should it attempt to partner with the private sector?*

These questions arose for discussion from the impassioned observations of Dr. William Durden, the keynote speaker, on the preparedness of the higher education community to engage in the business of distance learning. Dr. Durden felt that the cultures of business and higher education are like oil and water, and that higher education is poorly prepared to compete against or partner with the non-traditional educational companies in the private sector. In Dr. Durden's view, the stress on independence in academia—down to and including the views and efforts of individual faculty members—works against a free market of educational services.

Dr. Durden did provide a graceful exit in case he angered too many in the audience by stating that the world of higher education did have specific strengths that it ought to accentuate in the developing world of distance learning. Citing that it was in the academic community where the substance (or “product” as he might see it) of distance learning exists, he felt that it should only fall to the business community to package and distribute that substance.