Increasing California Community College Access through Distance Education

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Although 21st-century community colleges have incorporated distance learning into their repertoires of instructional delivery, many educational opportunities provided through modern technology are yet to be realized, (Stumpf, McCrimon, & Davis, 2005, p. 358).

The mission of the California Community College system is to provide access to post-secondary education to any high school graduate or adult who can benefit. The primary focus is to provide access to courses leading to transfer to a four-year college, an associate degree or vocational enhancement/certification. The California Community College system is the largest such system in the world serving over 2.5 million students per year. It is predicted that the state of California may add up to 11 million more people by 2025 (Committee & MIG, 2006) and that community college enrollments will rise commensurately.

To provide access, California community colleges have been strategically built throughout the state within a 30 minute drive for most students. Such is the case for the majority of the state's population, but not for everyone. As the third largest state, many people live in rural areas far from the nearest college. For these, access to a community college is difficult, if not impossible. Yet, physical proximity is only one such factor limiting access to community college. There are other, just as real, barriers to college access such as work schedules, class schedules, family obligations, transportation difficulties, physical disabilities, etc. Educational leaders have a professional and ethical responsibility (ACCCA, 2002) to help overcome such barriers and to increase access to quality education for all potential community college students. Distance education provides a powerful potential to provide increased access to higher education in California.

According to the new California Community Colleges System Strategic Plan (Committee & MIG, 2006), the system needs to build capacity in order to serve the increasing number of community college students while expanding the use of "alternative delivery methods such as distance education and outreach centers" (p. 26). The plan recommends that programs should be designed and delivered such that students may obtain a degree or certificate through in-house or distance education (p. 41). Clearly, distance education is a viable strategy for increasing access and it is time for community colleges to take the initiative to expand the use of this resource. Distance education not only provides access for students that are not able to come to campus for whatever reasons – distance, transportation, work, family, health – it also frees classroom and parking space so as to provide additional access for on-campus students.

Distance education refers to classes whereby the teacher and students are separated by time and distance. The first such classes were known as correspondence courses and used postal mail. Nowadays, most distance classes are offered online via the Internet.

As stated, there are many viable reasons why distance education opportunities should be expanded throughout the system. Additionally, one could argue that educational leaders have an ethical

responsibility to expand quality distance education opportunities in order to meet the needs of students and fulfill their professional duties (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2005). In other words, it is unethical if we do not work more quickly and effectively to expand distance education because so many potential students are not being served. So, why has the system been so slow to embrace distance education -- and what can we do to change this?

I would argue that a major reason community colleges have not embraced distance education is because a large contingent of faculty and administration are not convinced that online instruction measures up to the same quality standards of on-campus instruction. They believe that distance education is a lesser substitute for classroom instruction. Therefore, to protect institutional integrity, online courses may be tolerated, but, not promoted. If that isn't enough, reports of high-drop out rates and concerns about cheating supply powerful anecdotal evidence of this medium's reputed deficiencies. Finally, why should instructors who love the classroom and interaction with students want to give that up for a computer they may very well struggle to use? Beyond all this, there are significant issues related to startup costs, training, development, copyright, course ownership and fear that distance education will replace instructors. So, is it any wonder that distance education has not been fully embraced at community colleges?

Although the reasons for the slow growth online instruction are understandable, they are not acceptable. Many students are effectively being denied access to higher education who might otherwise have a chance to participate and succeed. This is not acceptable when we have an ethical responsibility to reach these students if possible -- and it is possible.

I think the primary reason for the lack of progress in the expansion of distance education courses and programs can be largely attributed to a lack of leadership. Although the CCC System leaders have recently offered a vision for distance education, they have not adequately provided for local resources for implementation. At the local level, many college leaders have lacked a powerful vision for expanding distance education and have not made it a priority. There is little encouragement or incentive coming from the top-down. Misconceptions and status quo inertia diminish efforts from the bottom-up. The result is that many students are denied access to higher education.

Effective leadership can make a difference. We need educational leaders that understand the barriers and opportunities for distance learning. We need leaders who can tell the story that online instruction is different than on-campus instruction, but it is effective when it is done right. Distance education increases access. It is not for every student, but it may be the only way possible for many students to fulfill their educational goals. As stated by Stumpf, et al., "Unless community colleges rise to the challenge of bridging that technological gap by striving to overcome misconceptions of the distance-learning paradigm, they will be unable to seize all of the opportunities it affords" (2005, p. 359). We need educational leaders at all levels to develop a sense of urgency around a common vision that is implemented in order to make these opportunities a reality.

There is a significant contingent of students who will benefit from distance education if it is offered. According to the California community Colleges Distance Education Report (Nather, 2005, p. 10), student enrollments in distance education have risen steadily for the last nine years from 2.52% to 8.60% of total enrollments. Furthermore, there is enough demand for online instruction that this proportion can rise significantly as overall enrollments increase. According to statewide student satisfaction surveys (Nather, 2005), about 12% of online students live more than 20 miles from the nearest community college campus (p. 39), 90% strongly agreed or agreed that the community

colleges should offer more distance education courses (p. 42) and 90% strongly agreed or agreed they would take another distance education course (p. 42). In terms of quality, 82% of the students were either satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of instruction and 84% were either satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of course materials (p. 40). These data all suggest that there are significant levels of student satisfaction with distance education and significant levels of student interest for more of it.

So how do we make a change? How do we overcome barriers and expand access to a greater number of students through distance education? For one, community college faculty and administrators need to realize that there is a sizable student population that is ready and willing to learn online. These students are satisfied with the medium and the quality and they are successful at completing online courses. They would like the opportunity to take more online courses. We need to get beyond our personal preferences for teaching on campus and find a way to provide increased access to students via online instruction. Secondly, colleges need to provide better leadership in developing quality online programs and recruiting/supporting online faculty. Teaching online is not for everyone, but, we can do a better job of identifying, recruiting and supporting online faculty. There are many institutional obstacles to overcome, but it can be done with effective leadership. "Administrative support is essential for growth in online learning" (Stumpf, McCrimon, & Davis, 2005). Increasing access is our ethical responsibility – distance education offers great potential that we have yet to realize. We need educational leaders to rise to the occasion to increase access through distance education.

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