HONEY, I GREW THE CAMPUS

One aspect of the culture of American higher education that has always puzzled us is the tendency of its various sectors to emphasize their differences. In so doing, they often conclude that they can only learn from the experiences of similar institutions, thereby missing the opportunity to think about their circumstances from another point of view.

At first glance, large and small institutions appear to have little in common. Large institutions have the advantage of greater resources and greater curricular breadth, but they suffer from the disadvantages that go along with large size: impersonality, bureaucracy, lack of focus on teaching and learning, and so on. Small institutions are in the reverse situation: they tend to have a greater sense of community and a more personal focus on individual students, but they lack the advantages of a large resource base and economies of scale.

We know that many large institutions are using IT to gain the advantages of “small” by creating small learning cohorts within large courses or small honors colleges within large universities. In describing its redesign of the introductory statistics course under the auspices of the Pew Grant Program in Course Redesign, Penn State titles its presentations, “Honey, I Shrunk the Course.” What these institutions have discovered is that “small” is merely a proxy for personalized attention to the learning needs of students—something that simply being small does not guarantee. Can small colleges find analogous ways to use IT to overcome their particular disadvantages while playing on their strengths? We think they can.

As an example, one of the challenges faced by small institutions is meeting students’ demand for greater breadth of study and for professional programs. National surveys of freshmen and studies of trends in baccalaureate degree programs indicate a shift in students’ academic goals from liberal arts study to career preparation. In addition, globalization and the knowledge explosion have greatly increased the scope of what students are looking for in majors and areas of specialization. Meeting the growth in content domains and in specialized topics within those domains presents a special challenge for institutions whose curricula are limited because of size. Small colleges struggle with breadth of offerings, especially in regard to the full range of professional courses, and with depth of the liberal arts offerings because there is just too much that they cannot offer.

Online courses and programs present small institutions with an innovative opportunity to broaden their curricula. Currently, more than 20,000 credit courses are available online, and that number is expected to increase exponentially. This phenomenon offers all institutions the possibility of “importing” already designed and staffed courses—and even programs—as a way of providing a greater range of course offerings and a full assortment of modern majors for their students. As networked learning resources become increasingly available, with learning occurring anytime and anywhere, an institution’s role of providing instruction for its “own” students can become radically different.

A primary obstacle to taking advantage of these new opportunities can be one of fixed attitudes. Because small, primarily residential colleges view close interaction between students and faculty as a quality differentiator, some see the use of online learning as a threat to the coherence and integration of not just the curriculum but campus life in general. Online learning is viewed as “impersonal” and at odds with institutional identity. Campus administrators are fearful that what they offer prospective students and their parents—a close campus community, which is often the very reason for choosing a small institution—would be unalterably compromised by offering online courses.

An alternate view is represented by the concept of the “blended community.” In this instance, blending involves offering both face-to-face and online courses on a single campus. The notion of blending moves away from the kind of either-or/all-or-nothing thinking about online learning that can inhibit creative change. Rather than viewing distance learning as the way for off-campus students who are not on campus to study and face-to-face classroom interaction as the way for residential students to study, many institutions view these learning opportunities as part of a continuum, each with its own benefits for students. As J. Michael Adams, president of Fairleigh Dickinson University puts it, “I refuse to get involved in a debate over whether distance learning is better or worse than classroom teaching. It is simply different. And it is one channel that our students must be skilled in.”
Once the notion of a blended environment is accepted, the possibilities of what to blend and how to blend become numerous. Rather than (or in addition to) creating their own online courses, institutions may want to consider another approach to blending: taking advantage of the capacities of information technology to bring additional resources to the campus and, in the process, strengthening their internal offerings. Doing so involves a redefinition of the concept of community as it has traditionally been viewed on most campuses, moving from a nearly closed sense of community to one that both extends the college community out into the larger community and brings aspects of the latter into the campus.

There is widespread agreement that a blended distance-education approach—one with both on-campus and distance components—can be highly effective. Ordinarily this idea has been applied within a single course or within a particular major. An alternative approach would be to blend courses from outside the institutions with those offered on campus, both face-to-face and online. Students could major in a specialized field offered by an external institution while completing general education requirements at the home campus. Residential colleges are well suited to develop effective strategies for blending diverse learning experiences in such a way as to capitalize on the on-site or residential component.

Whether or not institutions agree with the concept of the blended campus, our students are creating their own versions while we think it over. On many residential campuses, students are taking courses online from other institutions and transferring in credits on an ad hoc basis. All institutions would be better served, both academically and financially, if they created the capacity for planned importing of courses. Students who do this individually pay tuition to the external institutions and potentially shorten their time spent on the home campus. A variety of more-productive arrangements are possible. By contracting with an external institution on a fee-for-service basis and folding these courses into the home campus curriculum, institutions can continue to collect tuition. In addition, they can “brand” the imported courses such that the entire process is transparent to students.

IT can enable an institution to retain the values of a small college but to add, through partnering, the clout of an institution many times its size. None of this obviates the importance of human interaction in small-college communities. The opportunity these institutions have is to wed high-tech with high-touch through creative partnerships with other institutions and organizations.

[Next month we'll examine the strengths and weaknesses of collaborative versus importing strategies as a way to create the blended campus.]

--CAT

*****************************************************************************

Bob is taking a break from The Learning MarketSpace for a few months to complete a book. In the interim, we will publish the "best of Bob." This column, written in October 1999, echoes our take on the current state of political leadership expressed in our last issue. In view of the current budget woes of Virginia and many other states, it's worth a second look.

*****************************************************************************

MR. JEFFERSON, WHAT DO YOU THINK?

The other day I picked up a local newspaper and was surprised to see a candidate for the General Assembly of Virginia suggesting that it might be time to consider privatizing some or all of the state's colleges and universities and using tax credits or tuition vouchers as the state vehicle to fund and encourage higher education.

Well, you can imagine the consternation of the public higher education community. Even the reporter couldn't help editorializing in the front page article. You can also imagine the editorial appearing on the next day's editorial page. All this in Mr. Jefferson's Commonwealth.

The candidate was bemoaning the bureaucracy and political gamesmanship that goes on at budget time. His response was to have the money follow the student. Subsidize the consumer rather than the provider. Never mind that even Washington has discovered that funding the recipient rather than the provider works a lot better —our poor political aspirant had done the candidate equivalent of passing gas in church.

I wonder what Mr. Jefferson would think? After all, it was he who hailed The establishment of the University of Virginia suggesting that it might be time to consider privatizing some or all of the state's colleges and universities and using tax credits or tuition vouchers as the state vehicle to fund and encourage higher education.

The paper's editorial was cutely titled "Let's not 'privatize' the old college try." The editorial writer said, "There are those ideas that are rejected out of hand because they are so utterly nonsensical that, for good reason, they are not to be taken seriously." I searched in vain for the "good reason" through the rest of the editorial. Students might use the tax credit or voucher to attend "an all-girls college" or maybe even pick a proprietary school. They might choose to go to a seminary or another religious affiliated school. I looked in vain for some reason other than that the candidate had chosen to "home school" his children but didn't find one. Of course, the paper was all for taking the politics and bureaucracy out of public higher education.

It never ceases to amaze that those who most strongly profess their openness to new ideas are incapable of imagining any future that is more than just a minor perturbation of the status quo. Too many of our leaders suffer the same syndrome as ascribed to the corporate executive—their focus is no farther than the next
quarterly report.

What exactly is the role of state government in supporting higher education? Must they "operate" institutions of higher education or is their imperative to see that post-secondary educational experiences are available and that citizens are encouraged to take advantage of them through governmental support. The latter doesn't presuppose the former, the voice of our editorial writer to the contrary notwithstanding.

What would Mr. Jefferson think? I suspect he would think that our unhappy candidate has an idea worth considering.

--RCH

******************************************************************************

UPCOMING LEADERSHIP FORUM EVENTS

IMPROVING QUALITY AND REDUCING COSTS: REDESIGNING CAMPUS LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS
EDUCAUSE Full-Day Pre-Conference Seminar
October 1, 2002, Atlanta, Georgia
8:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.

The Pew Grant Program in Course Redesign has funded 30 institutions to show how to improve quality and reduce costs using technology. This seminar will replicate the workshops that have successfully taught grant applicants how to redesign large-enrollment, introductory courses. Through presentations, case studies, and group work, participants will learn the basic planning steps as well as how to adapt the redesign model to the needs of their institutions.

Conducted by:
--Carol A. Twigg, Executive Director
--Carolyn Jarmon, Associate Director
Center for Academic Transformation

For registration information, please visit the EDUCAUSE 2002 Conference web site.

STATE-OF-THE-ART LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS: LESSONS FROM THE PEW GRANT PROGRAM IN COURSE REDESIGN
December 6, 2002, Atlanta, Georgia
Co-sponsored by the Executive Forum in Information Technology at Virginia Tech

This seminar will present results from the third of three rounds of the Pew Grant Program in Course Redesign. Learn from faculty project leaders how to increase quality and reduce costs using information technology. Faculty from four institutions will talk about their models of course redesign, including their decisions regarding student learning objectives, course content, learning resources, course staffing and task analysis, and student and project evaluation. These models provide varied approaches that demonstrate multiple routes to success, tailored to the needs and context of each institution.

These seminars provide a unique opportunity for you to:

- Learn firsthand how to increase quality and reduce costs using information technology from successful faculty project leaders.
- Find out how to design learning environments for the future by tapping the expertise of those who have done it.
- Talk with experienced faculty from multiple institutions about how and why they made their redesign decisions.
- Move beyond "today" and learn where on-line learning is going . . . find a model that will work for your institution.

******************************************************************************

SUBSCRIPTIONS, ARCHIVES, RE-POSTING

To subscribe to The Learning MarketSpace, click here.

Archives of The Learning MarketSpace, written by Bob Heterick and Carol Twigg and published from July 1999 – February 2003, are available here.

You are welcome to re-post The Learning MarketSpace on your intranet without charge. Material contained in The Learning MarketSpace may be reprinted with attribution for non-commercial purposes.

Copyright 2002 by Bob Heterick and Carol Twigg.