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David Bilyeu
Central Oregon Community College

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Developing Distance Education

by David Bilyeu

Central Oregon Community College

College education is breaking out of the confines of campus buildings and crossing the state using every sort of technology available. Technologies range in how much they diverge from conventional classroom settings by challenging the barriers of time and place. Real-time broadcast video allows teachers to do what they have done in front of the classroom podium and makes it possible for students to gather in a classroom somewhere else—or even multiple classrooms in other places. Oregon ED-NET I is a satellite broadcast that allows the instructor to be seen in remote classrooms (students can be heard but not seen by the instructor). Oregon ED-NET II is a satellite system that allows these multiple classrooms to both “see” and “hear” each other. However, in “classrooms” that use a computer network, teachers and students need not work at the same place or time. An instructor can post a lecture in the morning that may be read by the student later that evening or the next day. Nevertheless, a genuine exchange of ideas takes place. Low-cost video delivery is sometimes used to eliminate the time barrier. A video tape of the instructor’s class can be delivered by mail or courier services. Variations of these delivery systems are being used throughout Oregon.

The programs in Oregon provide a broad spectrum of types, from specific programs delivered to industry workers, to isolated individual courses, to complete degree programs delivered at a distance. These programs may originate from a single institution, or they may be the joint operation of several institutions who have combined expertise and other resources. The Oregon Center for Advanced Technology Education (OCATE) is a consortium of colleges and universities focused on delivering graduate-level engineering courses to part-time students who are currently working in the industry. The driving force behind this model is often a particular industry that sees a need to find access to continuing education for its employees.

There are examples of joint institution programs not so much industry driven, but with a specific discipline defined. For example, the Oregon Health Sciences University assumed the responsibility for coordinating statewide distribution of bachelor and graduate nursing programs so that a higher quality and more uniform training could be made available statewide. This is a kind of management efficiency. A collaborative multicampus degree program (bachelor through doctoral) in bio-anthropology is being considered. Resources from four cooperating sites will be combined to get an efficiency of larger numbers of stu-

dents and other kinds of resources, such as laboratory specimens, expertise, and library resources. There is also a consortium of community colleges that has developed a statewide associate degree program.

There are many examples of individual institutions forming classes, some of which lead to degrees. Eastern Oregon State College has been a leader in Oregon in distance education, and Linfield College’s business degree has often been pointed out as a model program. Oregon State University delivers a bachelor’s degree in liberal studies at several sites.

A movement toward developing higher education alternatives in Oregon goes back at least to 1982 when the Oregon State Board of Higher Education called for “a centrally coordinated, institutionally based off-campus instruction program.” (1:16) A big boost to fledgling programs came when the Annenberg Foundation and Corporation for Public Broadcasting funded seven technology projects around the nation through New Pathways to a Degree in 1991. The Oregon State System of Higher Education received one of these grants. Oregon State University, Eastern Oregon State College, Oregon Health Sciences University, and Central Oregon Community College were directly involved in the project. The New Pathways Project in Oregon built on the ED-NET networks authorized by the state legislature in 1989. Three degree programs, one in liberal studies, one in agricultural business management, and one in nursing were extended through the New Pathways Project. (1:18)

Meanwhile, the community colleges formed a group focused on telecommunications called Oregon Community College Telecommunications Consortium. Now interested more in the content rather than the delivery systems, this group has changed its name to the Oregon Community College Distance Education Consortium. It appears to be poised to tackle the management issues of distance education rather than just the technology to deliver programs.

Central Oregon Community College is the site of the University Center, which now coordinates bachelor’s and master’s degrees delivered from seven Oregon colleges and universities. New degree options are being developed in several fields. The University Center, originally created by the Oregon Legislature in its 1993 session, is an agency of the Oregon State System of Higher Education and is jointly funded and sponsored by Oregon State System of Higher Education, Central Oregon Community College, and the Office of Community College Services.

This is a thumbnail sketch of the activity in the state — it’s not an attempt to be comprehensive, but to be illustrative of the diversity of programs. While some states have a comprehensive distance learning plan, Oregon’s approach is a rather a loose-knit affair that has some elements of coordination and a little long-range planning. Programs are dependent upon initiatives of the individual institutions. This results in excellent local control over the programs — the marketing, choices in technological delivery, and con-

trol of the program can be hand tailored to fit the needs of the faculty and service region. But this can cause overlap and duplication. There is a level of institutional autonomy that can lead to encouraging local creativity and entrepreneurial activity. However, *Education Unbounded: A Vision of Public Higher Education Serving Oregon in the Year 2010* asserts, "the State System does not merely coordinate the activities of autonomous institutions; the System is responsible for ensuring that state needs are met in an integrated fashion." (2:9) The Higher Education 2010 Advisory Panel that wrote the report recommends a system that encourages the entrepreneurial approach, but also gives more authority to the Board of Higher Education to delegate resources to meet the expectations of the State. (2:8)

Various councils and committees within OSSHE are writing policy drafts and guidelines for distance education issues. The Office of Academic Affairs has a 26-page document in progress that suggests a statewide approach to course planning, student services, faculty issues, tuition and fees, student enrollment, and technical standards. (3:1) It attempts to create guidelines to foster cooperation in distance education programming and support and reduce duplication. Although the policies have not been formally adopted, the process of developing the documents has engaged practitioners of distance education and institutions in an important statewide discussion. This is a commendable effort to address 38 separate areas of policy concerns.

Loud voices from the Oregon library community have been effective in gaining the attention of OSSHE administration. This has resulted in including libraries in the basic planning and policy documents. Library support is addressed in *Distance Education Policy Recommendations* section 21. It states that, "Appropriate library services must be made available to distance learning students. ... Library staffs of both send and receive institutions must be prepared to support interlibrary loan, courier service, on-line access to catalogs and materials, and a growing array of facsimile tools." (3:12) It goes on to recommend that the *Interinstitutional Library Council's policy statement, Library Support for Distance Education Programs: Policy Statement and Recommendations* "serve as a guide for distance learning library services in the future." (3:21)

This policy statement comments on the importance of 1) library involvement early in the planning phases; 2) budget support for staff, materials, and technology; and 3) providing students access to library services. (4:1) It references *ACRL Guidelines For Extended Campus Library Services* (5) and recommends using this guide for planning library support. It also underscores the importance of various levels of agreements between libraries.

The policy statement is based on a report by the Interinstitutional Library Council. The council found that, "The critical need for library and information services receives insufficient attention both in terms of policies and procedures." (6:1) It recommends that the issues raised in the report be addressed from a statewide perspective. It sees

the need for adequate planning and the "more than marginal costs" as the two fundamental issues to library support for distance learning. (6:3)

This brief discussion gives some sense of the place the development of library policy has in regard to the goals and directions of public higher education in Oregon. Regardless of the technologies used, students need access to library collections and services whether they are taking a class on a college campus, 200 miles away at a designated site, or in their homes. Students need everything they would have access to if the library were right next door: the book catalog, the journal collection, locally mounted databases (or privileged database access whether local or not), reference services, the reserve collection, and interlibrary loan services. I would encourage all Oregon libraries to closely follow the developments in distance learning in their regions. In order to prepare for working together, read the ACRL Guidelines, the state planning documents, and other materials like *A Guide For Planning Library Integration into Distance Education Programs*. (7) Make sure you know what your institution is planning if you work where distance education is being considered. Seek representation in local distance education planning discussions. Do not let the myths of the virtual library mislead those in planning extended education opportunities to think that the total library support needs of every student can be answered by plugging in a computer. ☐

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