

Message from the Executive Director

The Tipping Point is Behind Us

by
Michael P. Lambert
Executive Director



These past few months have seen a number of congruent pieces of evidence that strongly indicate that online and distance learning have passed the “tipping point” in terms of public acceptance and enrollments. It seems fairly clear that online learning is well along its way in becoming the preferred way for people to learn in the 21st Century.

A U.S. Department of Education “meta study” of 51 research reports (ones that met a rigorous research design criteria) conducted since 1996 has found that students who took all or part of their instruction online *performed better*, on average, than those taking the same course through face-to-face instruction. Further, the study found that those who took “blended” courses—those that combine elements of online learning and face-to-face instruction—appeared to do best of all.

Many colleges report that blended

instruction is among the fastest-growing types of enrollment.

Online students at publicly traded for-profit institutions now comprise approximately 50% of all their students, versus just 12% of their students in 2002. Online students went from 1.82 million students in 2007 to 2.13 million in 2008 in all of higher education.

The Department of Defense spent more than \$474 million on tuition assistance for military members’ voluntary education in FY 2008, and nearly two thirds of this amount went for online learning courses. If current trend lines hold, the amount could reach three fourths in FY 2009.

The Obama Administration has announced it will award community colleges \$500 million to create online instructional materials that would be available free to community colleges and their students.

(continued)

(Message from the Executive Director, continued)

Two Concord Law School online students performed brilliantly in the regional competition of the American Constitutional Society's Moot Court Competition against students from law schools such as the University of Michigan, Duke, Berkeley, Wayne State, and others (there were close to 30 teams entered).

In the Annual Reports for 2008 from all DETC institutions, 95% of the students said they had achieved the goals they had when they enrolled, 96% said they were satisfied with their studies, and 95% said they would recommend their studies to a friend.

In view of these reputation-affirming studies and developments, it is little wonder why so many prestigious institutions, many of which looked down on correspondence study as being an unwanted interloper on the pristine lawns of Academia, now want to climb aboard the online learning band wagon.

DETC members have been in the distance education vineyard since 1890, and now find themselves competing for the same students from hundreds of other patrician higher education institutions, as well trade schools, for profit career colleges and of course, community colleges.

With the popularity of online learning among both learners and higher education

institutions growing with each passing day, DETC and its member institutions face the stiffest and most well-heeled competition in our long and storied history. More than 130 million Americans have studied with a DETC institution since 1890, and all of this collective experience will come into play in the next few years.

How should DETC members prepare to meet the new, vigorous, white hot competition? Here is my list of five suggestions:

"...DETC and its member institutions face the stiffest and most well-heeled competition in our long and storied history."

One: Keep foremost in mind the number one reason our learners have chosen us as their "school:" the *convenience of the method*. The more restrictions on learners' time that are put into our programs, the less convenient and less attractive they will be. There is a trade off to be considered: How much convenience can you diminish before you erode market share?

Two: Adhere strictly to—and exceed where possible—the DETC Standards for Accreditation. The bar for gaining DETC accreditation is at its highest in history, and the DETC Standards have never been more stringent. Having tough standards and firm enforcement serves all of the membership well, since it ensures public confidence in any school accredited by DETC.

(continued)

(Message from the Executive Director, continued)

Three: Keep tuition and fees affordable, within reach of the “average person.” Avoid the temptation to increase fees because there are federal loan programs or increased G.I. Bill benefits now. We are still in the grips of strong economic recession, and the recovery from it looks more and more to be a “jobless” one.

Four: Avoid “placing all your eggs in one basket” by becoming overly-dependent on one or two sources of revenue. In particular, be very aware that any federal benefit program can have the rules suddenly changed, and your institution might suddenly find itself on the rocky shoals of a cash flow crisis, and not sailing the open seas.

Five: Finally, while it is no doubt a good idea to enhance your curricula and your student services with the all the affordable and effective “bells and whistles” offered by the new technology, bear in mind there is no substitute for rich curriculum content and timely, professional student service. These are key traits of successful institutions, and these, not technology, will see you through the rough spots.

It’s official! The federal government, in its meta-study, has concluded that students who take all or part of their instruction online *perform better*, on average, than those taking the same course through face-to-face instruction. We have known this fact since 1890, but it is nice to have this truth recognized, even 119 years later.

As I survey the DETC community today, I see dramatic progress being made on every front, from credit acceptance, to employer acceptance, to student satisfaction. We, as a community, welcome the new competition, since we are confident that DETC institutions have the “right stuff” to lead the way in the new century for all institutions. The Tipping Point on the triumph of distance learning is now truly behind us.

For more information about the Distance Education and Training Council, visit www.detc.org