

United States—Commentary



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There are more than 4700 institutions of higher education in the United States. These include technical institutes, community colleges, state colleges and universities, a landgrant university in each state, private liberal arts colleges, private research universities, and, more recently, for-profit degree-granting companies. While distance education was once primarily the purview of land grant universities and, later, community colleges, online learning has greatly broadened the diversity of institutions that provide programs to students away from campus. One factor that makes it difficult to discuss a “national system” of distance education in the United States is that higher education tends to be organized at the state level rather than nationally. At the national level, distance education innovations tend to be shared within families of institutions through their own professional associations (American Association of Community Colleges, University Professional and Continuing Education Association, etc.). One major exception is the Online Learning Consortium, which was formed when the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation brought together institutions that it had funded through its “asynchronous learning networks” grants program in the 1990s. That said, there is a long tradition of institutional collaboration that cuts across many distance education technologies and governance boundaries.

In the heyday of correspondence study, most U.S. distance education providers were land grant universities that belonged to the National University Extension Association (now called the University Professional and Continuing Education Association). For the most part, the emphasis was on courses rather than degree programs. NUEA member institutions published a unified course catalog that was widely used.

In the late 1970s, the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) shifted its national television delivery technology to satellite. This created a nation-wide platform for

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117

sharing of video-based distance education courses. Courses were downloaded to local stations via satellite and then broadcast, with local institutions licensing the use of individual courses to offer credit. The PBS satellite system also fostered other kinds of collaboration. One—the National University Teleconferencing Network—allowed universities to distribute live, noncredit seminars to other higher education institutions, which would host local viewing and discussion sessions at their local stations. Another, AG*SAT (today called ADEC, the American Distance Education Consortium), networked Cooperative Extension Offices around the country, sharing research transfer information to researchers and practitioners across states. Another collaborative, the International University Consortium, adapted highly interdisciplinary course packages from the Open University of the United Kingdom to the North American curriculum and licensed their use to individual institutions.

The online environment eliminated geography as a defining factor in the institution's relationship with the student. It also shifted the emphasis from single courses to complete degree programs. Head-to-head competition for students has tended to work against some kinds of collaboration. However, it has also stimulated new collaborations. One example is the Great Plains IDEA (Interactive Distance Education Alliance), through which state universities in the American Midwest have developed collaborative degree programs to ensure that students in specialized degree programs have access to the best content from across the region, regardless of their home state. Students take online courses from multiple institutions to complete the degree. Another example is the Community College Consortium for Open Educational Resources, a collaborative of two-year colleges from 21 states that promotes policies and practices around the use of OERs to expand student access and faculty choice of materials to use in courses.

The growth of online distance education for undergraduate and graduate degree programs has been accompanied at many institutions by a decrease in traditional continuing education, especially noncredit engagements for training and research transfer. Looking ahead, there is an opportunity for institutions to use online distance education to build new inter-sector relationships with key constituencies. This might include partnerships with K-12 schools to share OERs and to offer dual-enrollment courses that improve the potential that students will graduate from high school prepared to move on to higher education. It might also include the development of online learning communities that bring together higher education institutions and industries or professional organizations to ensure that employees have access to professional development and new research results and that use social media to maintain a dialog between faculty and practitioners to solve problems and generate new research challenges.

Online distance education is gradually blurring the old distinctions among institutions, while opening new pathways for engagement with the community.

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