

Online Education May Impact Foreign Recruitment

by Robert Sedgwick
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There are a number of factors that account for the recent success and expansion of the electronic classroom in the United States. Shifts in the demographic landscape, changing market forces and technological advancements, coupled with the rising demand for college degrees, have all given impetus to this new trend that is quickly changing the shape of higher education.

Student enrollments are expected to reach 20 million by the year 2010. The recent surge can be attributed to both the high rate of secondary school graduates applying to institutions of higher education and the growing cohort of part-time students, which has risen at a faster rate than full-timers. At present, only about 15 percent of all American college students are comprised of 18- to 22-year-olds living on campus.

Most part-time students in the United States are adult professionals who go back to school for retraining and — to a lesser extent — intellectual stimulation. Between 1970 and 1993, for example, the number of students over the age of 40 increased by 235 percent.

Instead of preparing for the imminent deluge of students by expanding programs and facilities, most institutions have been preoccupied with cutting costs. At the same time, however, schools have tried to offset the ill effects of shrinking budgets by stepping up overseas recruitment. Most foreign students pay full tuition and hence represent an important source of income for campuses nationwide.

But while an American degree is highly coveted overseas, many qualified students are discouraged

by the small fortune it costs in tuition and miscellaneous expenses to get one. Others are working professionals who can't just pick up and leave their jobs and families to pursue a higher education in the United States. These and other impediments often make it difficult for recruiters to attract foreign applicants.

The solution: If you can't bring the student to the university, why not bring the university to the student? With recent advances in computer and satellite technology, more and more schools in the United States are turning to distance learning — and Web-based courses in particular — as a way of expanding their programs, both at home and abroad.

Storming the Ivory Tower

For Professor Chris Sciabarra, a visiting scholar at New York University's Department of Politics, online education has the potential to bring students and faculty together from all over the world in a way that was simply inconceivable in years past. Overseas students make up about 65 percent of the enrollment in his *Cyber-Seminar on Dialectics and Liberty*.

"The course has busted through all geographical boundaries," Sciabarra said. "I've taught people all over the United States and in Europe, including Sweden and Norway, and I'm very pleased with the caliber of the students who have registered for these classes."

Sciabarra also believes that many of the changes brought to higher education by way of the new information technology are long overdue.

"I think long-distance learning opportunities are increasing, and slowly democratizing education [while] breaking down the barriers of scholarly discourse," he said.

"Academia has for too long been residing in the 'ivory tower'... and any opportunities which we have that might broaden our ability to reach a more diversified population of students and colleagues should be encouraged."

Perhaps more than other institutions in this country, American higher education managed to remain largely cloistered from the pressures of the market until quite recently. But critics argue that a good number of colleges and universities have, over the years, evolved into inefficient and wasteful bureaucracies maintained and dominated by entrenched cliques of academic mandarins.

Now however, as reform-minded individuals within academia turn to the business world for solutions, higher education is increasingly being discussed in market terms: Courses and degree programs are fast becoming commodities to be packaged and sold to growing numbers of student consumers, both at home and abroad. The Internet has served to enhance this process by providing a platform on which schools can advertise and deliver their educational programs to the public.

Skeptics Abound

At the same time, there are those within academia who view computer-based education with a great deal of skepticism. Many college professors have voiced concerns over the high dropout rates among online students, the potential for fraud, the proliferation of diploma mills and the lack of control that faculty members have over the development and implementation of these cyber programs.

In particular, the American Association of University Professors asserts that the utilization of distance-learning technologies raises important questions about stan-

dards for teaching and scholarship.

"Certainly online learning can be used to enhance college curricula," said Mark Smith, a history professor who currently serves as the organization's associate director of government relations. "But it is no substitute for the kind of face-to-face interaction that takes place between students and teachers in a classroom. I really don't believe there is a reliable assessment of this kind of education yet."

Foreign Students

There are a number of ways that overseas students could benefit from online education. First and foremost, the money saved in room-and-board fees and transportation costs can be considerable in the long run. Take the University of Maine, for example, where the cost of a bachelor's degree at the school's main campus in Orono is

to top academic institutions all over the United States.

But while the majority of American students enjoy access to the Internet either at home or at school, the fact remains that most of the world is not sufficiently wired to receive online education — and probably won't be for some time to come.

This is particularly true throughout the developing world where access to computers and the Internet remains extremely limited. Even in cases where students are fortunate enough to have access, the antiquated telephone systems found in some countries often result in faulty Internet connections. Moreover, while subscribers in the United States are charged a flat monthly rate for unlimited usage, users in other parts of the world have to pay by the click, which can be very expensive.

"They are confusing and not at all designed in ways to maximize accessibility," she said. "I would say that the majority of schools in this country are not seriously considering the problems encountered by international students who try to use their web pages."

Bonanza or Bust?

Experts predict that, by the end of 1999, at least three out of four colleges in the United States will provide Web-based education in some capacity. In addition to the traditional academic institutions that currently offer these programs on the side, there are also a number of so-called "virtual colleges" (Western Governors' University and Jones International University, for example) specializing exclusively in distance education. All of these schools, along with a number of for-profit educational companies and private corporations, are currently jockeying for position in a market that few people really understand.

Jonathan Levy, executive director for the Office of Distance Learning at Cornell University, feels that what the market is missing right now is a unified vision. "It lacks an orchestra conductor," he explained. "At the moment, everything is still shifting around. There's no coherent plan yet. If you look at what all these schools are doing, it's a bit like the story of the blind men and the elephant. Everyone has a different idea of what the market looks like and where it's going. They understand bits and pieces of it, but no one's getting the whole picture."

Many college and university administrators struggling with budgetary woes have greeted the advent of online education with much enthusiasm.

For one thing, there are fewer facilities to maintain because the electronic classroom circumvents the need for campus infrastruc-

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about \$34,000. However, for only \$14,880, a student can earn the same degree over the Internet from anywhere in the world.

Moreover, foreign students can spare themselves a lot of bureaucratic hassle by choosing online education over traditional degree programs. There are no visas, diplomatic red tape, or restrictive immigration policies to worry about, and the only borders to cross exist in cyber-space.

By simply using a computer and modem, students living in some of the most remote areas of the world can potentially plug in

Ruth Sylte, assistant director of LEXIA International and a consultant with the Manitou Group, is dissatisfied with the level of accessibility afforded by many of the Web sites designed by American universities that are supposed to appeal to foreign students.

"I am appalled at the way some of these Web sites have been set up," said Sylte, who recently returned from India, where she participated in a series of workshops aimed at training administrators and faculty how to find information about American colleges and universities over the Internet.

present relations with the West and with the United States, in particular. Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, for instance, have readily adopted American and European models.

On the other hand, Iran, Indonesia and Sri Lanka have taken a more defensive stance against the influences of creeping westernization, which they see as undermining indigenous cultures and identities. In some cases, colonialism played a pivotal role in westernizing Asian universities, while in others (such as Japan and Thai-

land) there was a self-motivated effort to develop educational systems along American lines.

Further distinctions in the structures of Asian higher learning arise from the fact that these countries operate under disparate economic systems — capitalist, communist, transitional — and have all reached various stages of socioeconomic development.

The book also provides a good overview of the governing bodies and policies that regulate the structures of education in each of the countries presented. There is a fair

amount of current data here pertaining to student enrollments, faculty appointments and rates of graduation.

In short, anyone with an interest in comparative education or wishing to acquire some background knowledge on systems of higher education in Asia will find this book useful and informative.

Although it may be a bit broad and generalized for specialists of the region, admissions officers will no doubt appreciate its value as a handy reference guide to the region.

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tures. Secondly, online education reduces the number of personnel required to teach and support college courses and programs. Why hire three professors when one can teach the same number of students — if not more — online? In essence, the Internet could do for higher education what the ATM machine did for banking 20 years ago.

But according to Mike Lambert, executive director of the Distance Education and Training Council, this view is just too good to be true. In actuality, he says, online education is a capital-intensive industry that requires support networks, communication-technology infrastructures, marketing experts, graphic designers and consultants.

“A lot of college administrators see [online education] as a get-rich-quick scheme, but it’s just not that easy,” he cautioned. “In reality, it takes time. We’re talking about one-and-a-half years to develop a good course and get it up on the Web. Colleges will find that these programs are going to chew up a lot of money, and there’s not going to be a big return on the initial investment.”

Moreover, the competition for online students will be fierce, and not everybody is going to survive the onslaught. What happens, for

instance, when a small regional college in Oklahoma, which was founded specifically to meet the needs of the local community, suddenly finds Harvard or Duke in its back yard competing for students?

Colleges that lack large endowments depend heavily on tuition and the revenues generated by their continuing-education programs. Inevitably these are the schools that stand to lose the most in the long run.

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and elsewhere have acknowledged its impact on higher education — and have adapted accordingly. What is less clear, though, is how the virtual classroom will affect the future of overseas student recruitment.

If the strategy aimed at bringing students to the university is changed to include bringing the university to the students via the Internet, then it is certainly possible to contemplate expanding foreign enrollments at American institutions of higher education in the

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these smaller colleges will lose money and become disillusioned,” said Lambert. “Then there will be a period of consolidation, when institutions come together to form consortia.”

Although the online-learning industry is currently fraught with controversy, most colleges and universities in the United States

years to come.

However, by the same token, it is also possible to imagine a significant drop in the number of foreigners who actually come to the United States each year to study. Such implications suggest far-reaching changes in the nature and infrastructure of international education.