

A Proposed Cornell Strategy for Distance Learning: Conceptual Issues

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Tuesday, October 12, 1999**

Introduction

- A distance learning strategy for Cornell: a faculty perspective.
- Post on the University Faculty website to stimulate a campus-wide discussion.
- Participate in the revolution.

Numerous initiatives are underway

Office of Distance Learning Task Force Report¹.

Academic Leadership Series² to explore distance learning.

Ad hoc group of individuals (David Lipsky, Jon Levy, Paul Velleman, Dan Huttenlocher, Dean Sutphin, and myself)

Trustees' Task Force on Distance Learning

¹ http://www.ipr.cornell.edu/ALS_Web/ALS_NewHighlights.HTML

² http://www.ipr.cornell.edu/ALS_Web/distance_learning_resource.htm

General Expectations of the Cornell Faculty on the Distance Learning Initiative

- **We should establish the highest standards of excellence as our hallmark in order to protect and enhance our reputation.** We must protect and enhance our reputation and 'brand name'.

- **Faculty participation must be voluntary.**
We became members of this faculty to teach Cornell undergraduate and graduate students.

A few members of the faculty have long had responsibility for educating older, non-resident persons, but the existence of the Internet provides a strong new incentive for an expansion of such activities.

Distance learning will and should broaden the class of those whom we serve and we must be clear about our resolve to broaden the scope of faculty service on a voluntary basis.

- **We must generate new sources of income.** Aside from our service obligation to society, we have a pressing financial problem. We simply cannot sustain indefinitely the path we're following without some fundamental change. This effort should help us sustain our current residential model of education. Quite simply, we must find a major new revenue stream to permit a more sensible rate of tuition growth and to supplement faculty salaries that are growing too slowly.

- **We should utilize our existing strengths in a constructive manner — primary focus should be on CONTENT, not technology.** We have a world-class research university faculty, whose members bring great content expertise to their assignments. Many, but not all faculty have interests in information technologies and a desire to serve broad state, national or worldwide audiences.

Organizing themes:

- 1) In the language of the corporate world, we should become the wholesale, not retail, supplier of content. We should choose to establish an identity for excellence as a major source for graphically rich, interactive 'digital textbook' content for the next generation.**

- 2) We should choose to make a commitment to our graduates to serve their lifelong educational needs as a core value in our fundamental commitment to remain an elite research university into the next century. This will expand significantly our traditional outreach to the people of the State of New York.**

Commentary

- **De-emphasize the role of expensive and short-lived technology in this emerging phase.**
- **Remain focussed on student-faculty interactions on the Cornell campus and need not create massively new demands upon faculty time.** Materials created will be utilized here and will impact resident students.
- **Remain free of the responsibility of assuring that the delivery to the end-user meets Cornell standards. The awarding of course credit and conferral of degrees can be separated and delayed.** [Some parts of the university will choose to make the long-term commitments needed to create and deliver high quality services and degrees/certificates to end users for highly specialized, well-funded audiences for premium costs. But we need not rush into that general market.]
- **We need not invest in the end-user teachers needed to provide human interaction for encouragement and feedback if we concentrate on content.**

In summary, a wholesale focus will free us of responsibility for creating an elaborate technology infrastructure, the human interaction with the end-user, and the burden of certification of learning or degrees.

Other Issues:

Create a Cornell Digital Press: Cornell should found a for-profit digital press to service this effort and that of Cornell Cooperative Extension, ILR, etc.

- 1) Ownership of Intellectual Property:** The thorny issue of intellectual property ownership can be resolved on an ad hoc basis, rather than as a policy mandate. Cornell faculty are accustomed to negotiating with publishers, but not with the University. We can avoid a bitter and needless confrontation over institutional policy on intellectual property.
- 2) Financial Support:** Requires substantial support, say up to \$500,000 to \$1,000,000 for large projects and to assure the level of initial and sustained faculty involvement, some initial developmental support, maintenance support and royalty commitment must be made at the outset. Issues of ownership will require an explicit and upfront clarification of ownership issues and of the need for long-term involvement of the authors to assure its continual improvement and upgrade.
- 3) Attractive employment opportunities** for emeritus faculty and faculty spouses.

Options for our Alumni: We should make a commitment to our alumni to serve their lifelong educational need. ‘

- The emeritus faculty group, CAPE, is already considering an effort to capture from each emeritus faculty interested in participating, a ‘great lecture’.

Options for prospective students: We should provide free access to the first chapters of these materials to those who submit an application for admission.

Options for enrolled students: Create Cornell-flavored advanced placement or summer course equivalent courses to facilitate graduation in seven, rather than eight semesters.

Other Important Issues Note Addressed:

- Obvious omissions include specialized professional degree programs, some of which are under active discussion already.
- Great opportunity for bringing resources from outside Cornell to our students in residence
- Great potential for serving an international audience

We should move aggressively to implement.

One can easily imagine other directions in which to expand this effort. Indeed, not all of the options mentioned above need be implemented to create a comprehensive program. We should begin immediately, but with the clear understanding that we can and should adapt plans as we gain experience and as the technology develops.