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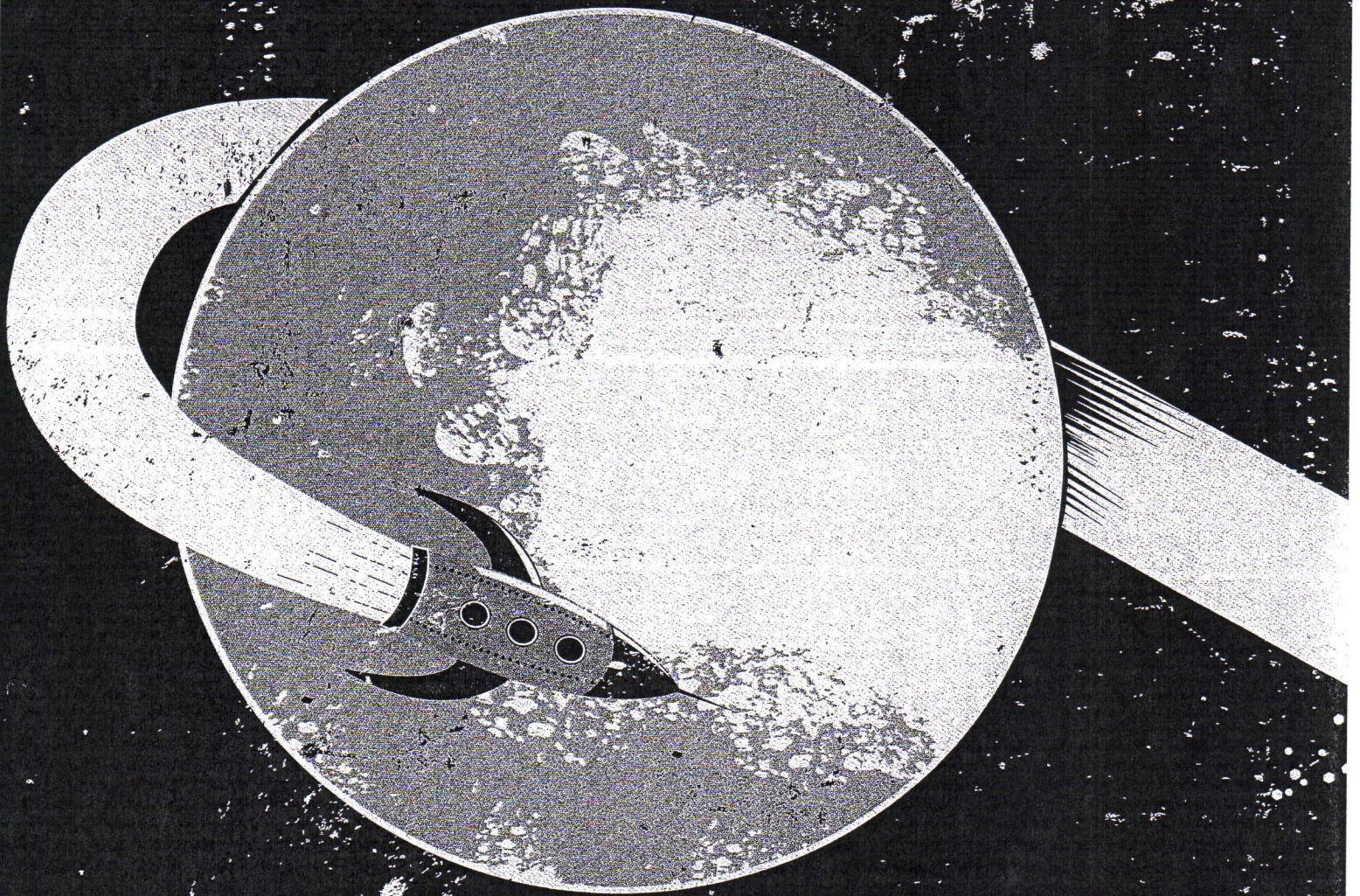
A higher level of education and training among the U.S. population is key to the country's future prosperity. Online learning may be the only way to make the quantum leap from here to there.

By Karla Hignite

President Obama has called the nation's present economic predicament a Sputnik moment. Believing the key for laying a solid foundation for future U.S. prosperity and competitiveness rests squarely on investing in the education and training of the American people, he has set a goal to increase the number of college graduates in the United States by five million by the end of this decade.

The Indianapolis-based Lumina Foundation has charted a more ambitious course yet: to increase the percentage of Americans with postsecondary degrees and credentials to 60 percent by 2025. Currently only about 39 percent of American adults have completed a two- or four-year degree—a rate that has remained flat for 40 years even as attainment rates among young adults in other countries have climbed past 50 percent, according to the foundation. By Lumina's own estimates, reaching its goal will require turning out 23 million additional college graduates beyond the numbers projected at current rates—all within the next 15 years. And that's what Lumina considers

the baseline for what is necessary. The foundation's 60 percent goal is based on its preliminary research about what percentage of jobs will require higher education and training to allow the United States to remain a global competitor in an increasingly knowledge-based economy.

The writing has been on the wall. Various international rankings have documented a steady slip in U.S. graduation rates and in student achievements in reading, science, and math. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Paris-based organization that develops and administers the Programme for International Student Assessment, between 1995 and 2008 the United States dipped from second to 13th in college graduation rates, and only 8 of the 34 other OECD countries have lower high school graduation rates.

READ AN ONLINE EXTRA about where distance learning is offered and who chooses it, "Who's There?" in *Business Officer Plus* at www.nacubo.org.

With degree completion a national priority, the bigger question becomes how to provide quality education to a diverse student population in an affordable manner while still giving learners good choices for what they can study and how they receive instruction, says Janet Poley, president and CEO of the American Distance Education Consortium, headquartered at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. Beyond the fact that the bricks-and-mortar capacity doesn't currently exist to accommodate the volume of students in need of postsecondary education, a traditional campus experience isn't a realistic solution these days for most adult learners, many of whom are busy with work and family commitments, and who aren't about to leave a paying job in this economy. For a growing number of Americans seeking higher education, online may be the only way to go.

Online Upsurge

And there is convincing evidence that distance learning continues to gain significant ground in higher education enrollments. According to the most recent Sloan Consortium survey of online learning, *Class Differences: Online Education in the United States,* approximately 5.6 million U.S. college and university students enrolled in one or more online courses in fall 2009—an increase of more than one million from the previous year. That represents the biggest year-to-year gain since the consortium published its first annual survey in 2003, and it reflects a 21 percent boost in online enrollments

compared to only a 2 percent growth in the overall student population for the same time period.

Another way to slice it: Nearly 30 percent of all U.S. higher education students are taking at least one course online. And while nearly one half of institutions surveyed report that the sour economy has driven demand for more face-to-face classes and programs, three quarters say it has accelerated demand for online courses and programs as well. While many expect online enrollments will eventually reach a saturation point, at present there is "no compelling evidence that the continued robust growth in online enrollments is at its end," the report concludes.

That rosy outlook is reflected elsewhere. According to *Trends in eLearning: Tracking the Impact of eLearning at Community Colleges*, a recent survey published by the Instructional Technology Council (ITC)—an affiliated council of the American Association of Community Colleges—nearly all respondents reported a seemingly endless supply of students interested in taking classes online, with 67 percent saying student demand for distance education classes is exceeding available course offerings.

And participating institutions in the 2010 *Managing Online Education* survey sponsored by the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies and The Campus Computing Project remain confident with regard to future e-learning growth potential (WICHE is the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education in Boulder, Colorado). While nearly all (96 percent) expect online enrollments at their campuses to increase during the next three academic years (2011–13), 30 percent anticipate gains of 16 percent to 20 percent, and 13 percent of respondents project growth of more than 20 percent for the next several years.

E-learning is not without its critics. During the past year, some proprietary institutions in particular have come under intense scrutiny for questionable marketing and student recruitment practices. According to the Department of Education, for-profit educators collectively account for about 11 percent of all higher education students, but they account for 26 percent of all student loans and 43 percent of all loan defaulters. Many of these students are enrolled in online programs. With tens of billions of federal student financial aid dollars up for grabs, officials will be watching closely to see how enrollments translate into completed degrees, jobs, and loan repayment rates.

Retention and degree completion have been issues for the distance learning sector as a whole, though significant progress has been made to close the gap between online and face-to-face classes. According to the ITC survey, completion rates have improved sharply since the early days of online instruction, when student retention often fell below 50 percent. In 2009, administrators reported that the average retention or completion rate for online classes was 72 percent, compared to 76 percent for traditional on-site courses.

Perceptions about quality—another nagging concern—have likewise improved. An impressive 91 percent of respondents to the ITC survey indicated their online classes were equivalent or superior to their face-to-face classes. That assessment is tempered somewhat by the broader pool of participants represented in the Sloan survey, which includes public, private nonprofit, and for-profit colleges and universities. Collectively, 66 percent of respondents agreed that their online courses are as good as or better than face-to-face instruction (76 percent of public institution leaders said so). Even so, that sentiment reveals a slow but steady gain from the 57 percent of respondents affirming the quality of online courses as reported in the first Sloan survey in 2003.

Other challenges confront the online sector. Perhaps none are more pressing than those involving the vision for and leadership of distance education programs

and initiatives that are poised to gain greater strategic significance for colleges and universities in the years ahead.

The Need for E-Collaboration

For starters, Saundra Williams isn't convinced that enough higher education administrators truly understand the level of growth set to occur in distance learning within the next five years. Part of this has been an outcome of current economic conditions, where many more individuals are returning to school to acquire additional training and higher-level degrees to improve their employability. "From a sheer capacity standpoint, some of this must be done online," notes Williams, senior vice president and chief of technology and workforce development for the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS), Raleigh.

Another driver of continued online growth will come from new programming emerging in response to a greater need for technical training, including classes that have traditionally occurred in the lab, says Williams. While some hands-on training will still need to take place face-to-face, advances in technology and media will allow for a lot more science-oriented education to be completed online, which in turn will greatly improve access to programs that are in high demand, notes Williams.

In addition to thinking more broadly about what can be taught electronically, educators have to move beyond institution and state boundaries to help students achieve their educational goals, argues Williams. That includes figuring out how to accommodate blended programming that requires some hands-on training and testing when the degree-granting institution may be at the opposite end of the state or across the country.

In one example, NCCCS is working to build relationships within and outside North Carolina to allow students in healthcare programs to accomplish in-demand internships in their local communities, even if that is at a hospital in a border state, says Williams. "Distance learning opens all kinds of doors for students who might not otherwise be able to pursue

an education, so we have to develop arrangements that work for them and still meet our institution requirements." The upside to the time and effort it takes to form these partnerships is that they in turn become a valuable vehicle for marketing your programs to a wider population of students, says Williams.

NCCCS, the third largest community college system in the nation, already boasts a strong e-learning track record. In 1999, the system established its Virtual Learning Community (http://vlc.nccom munitycolleges.edu), which includes a repository of 248 online curriculum courses and 45 online continuing education classes. As of 2010, 31 fully online degree programs were available through the state's 58 community college campuses. The University of North Carolina System has its own version of NCCCS's Virtual Learning Community. And North Carolina's eLearning Commission (www .elearningNC.gov) provides one-stop access to all distance learning initiatives throughout the state, including K–12, two- and four-year degree programs, and continuing career education. Together, these sites receive a huge volume of hits, notes Williams.

Another breakthrough: As of January 2011, all state public colleges and universities began using the same broadband network. "This will allow institutions to better collaborate on program offerings and provide the full menu of online coursework to all our rural areas across the state, so that we can help more students piece together what they need to complete a degree," notes Williams.

Degree Driven

Degree attainment has long been top of mind for Bruce Chaloux, director of student access programs and services at the Southern Regional Education Board, Atlanta. SREB is a compact of 16 southern states established in 1948 with the charge to engage more citizens in postsecondary education in support of regional economic development.

With the advent of e-learning, the board's Electronic Campus (www.electronic

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Distance Learning Resources

The following resources are referenced in this article:

Class Differences: Online Education in the United States (November 2010) [http://sloanconsortium.org/publications/survey/class_differences] is the eighth annual Sloan Consortium survey of online education in the United States, conducted by Babson Survey Research Group in collaboration with the College Board. The survey of more than 2,500 public, private nonprofit, and for-profit colleges and universities nationwide is based on data from fall 2009.

Trends in eLearning: Tracking the Impact of eLearning at Community Colleges (March 2010) [http://www.itcnetwork.org], conducted by the Instructional Technology Council—an affiliated council of the American Association of Community Colleges—profiles distance education programming at 226 associate's and associate's-dominant colleges in 2009.

2010 *Managing Online Education* survey [http://www.campuscomputing .net/2010-managing-online-education], a collaboration of the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies and the Campus Computing Project, is based on responses from 183 two- and four-year public and independent U.S. colleges and universities surveyed in October and November 2010.

Re-examining & Repositioning Higher Education: Twenty Economic and Demographic Factors Driving Online and Blended Program Enrollments [http://sloanconsortium.org/publications/jaln_main], by Kristen Betts, Kenneth Hartman, and Carol Oxholm III (Drexel University and Drexel University Online), was published in the *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, a publication of the Sloan Consortium (Volume 13, Issue 4, December 2009).

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campus.org) was a natural outgrowth of SREB's efforts to increase student access. In 1997, Chaloux founded and continues to oversee this electronic marketplace for distance learning, which today encompasses more than 30,000 courses and 1,000 degree programs from 300 accredited public and independent colleges and universities throughout the region. Among other resources, the portal allows students to compare costs and degree requirements across all of the institutions' programs. Over time SREB has expanded the site's services to include an online application system and is in the process of adding blended programming opportunities.

With the assistance of a Lumina Foundation grant, Chaloux currently heads a collaborative effort to boost adult learner degree completion. SREB will develop a pilot portal similar to its Electronic Campus targeted to individuals who already have some college credit.

"The idea behind this is to provide specific services, resources, and programming options to help people pick up where they left off," says Chaloux. Financial aid, credit transfer assistance, prior learning assessment, and career information services will be central to the portal. "Our ultimate goal is to take this nationwide to provide a clearinghouse of degree completion programs available to the 40-plus million adult learners in the United States who started college but were never able to finish," explains Chaloux. ➤

Four principles will undergird this effort:

■ **Convenience.** Programs will be completely online or blended to accommodate parents and working professionals who require flexibility to even consider finalizing a degree, notes Chaloux.

■ **Speed.** "We need to accelerate the learning process so that students can progress at their own pace and don't feel like it will take them 10 years to finish their degree requirements." Chaloux suggests that, among other things, this could mean shortening the length of terms to allow students to move through courses more quickly.

■ **Service.** "Bottom line, we have to *become* more adult friendly and not simply say that we are," Chaloux points out. That means tutorial and technical support centers must be available whenever students need help.

■ **Credit.** Nothing can be more defeating to adult learners than feeling like they are wasting time repeating what they've already done, says Chaloux. "We have to find a way to assess prior learning and to award credit for what an individual already knows."

Heather McKay is thrilled about the project's prospects. "This is a really important step for workforce development. Providing a way for many more to finally check off that box that they have a college degree can be a huge boost to their employability," says McKay, director of the Sloan Center on Innovative Training and Workforce Development as well as director of innovative training and workforce development programs at the Center for Women and Work at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey.

In addition to her ongoing involvement in various pilots to provide unemployed and incumbent workers easier access to online certificate and degree programs, McKay is working with SREB on the adult learner portal. The four-year, four-state pilot includes addressing articulation agreements and accreditation issues and aims to engage higher education institutions beyond state borders as well as those with programming geared to local workforce needs. "Equipping workers to fit the requirements of new jobs that are emerging will require a lot more cooperation going forward," warns McKay.

In general, she sees a huge opportunity for two- and four-year colleges to get more involved in occupational training. Community colleges in particular represent a viable vehicle to provide an innovative mix of hands-on and online training tailored to the specific needs of local economies, says McKay.

Something else she is eager to see evolve is the current system of workforce training, which typically is not structured for credit. "On the one hand, that's okay because the training still leads to employment, but I think more can and should be done to make it easier for individuals to acquire credit or be able to convert their training to credit down the road without repeating what they've already learned," says McKay. "If we really want to develop and maintain a strong national workforce and help individuals move to the next level in their jobs, all training should lead toward some kind of certificate or degree."

Shifting Market Share

Indeed, getting millions of Americans back to gainful employment will require acknowledgement by institution leaders of the need for higher education to begin building viable life rafts for students of all types and providing options for how and where they can learn, says Kenneth Hartman, academic director for Drexel University Online. In some instances, those life rafts for students may be what keep institutions afloat, suggests Hartman. He cites continued population shifts—including the steady decline of high school–age students in some parts of the country and surges of this same age bracket in other geographic reaches—as among the key demographic and economic factors that will contribute to

Online Defined

While the number of online courses and degree and certificate programs has mushroomed during the past decade, a less frequently discussed phenomenon taking shape has been the gradual blending of online and traditional face-to-face coursework and curriculum. *Blended* and *hybrid* can refer to an individual course or to a full degree program. Terms such as *Web-assisted, Web-enhanced, Web-facilitated,* and *technology-mediated* describe instruction that in some way combines face-to-face and online activities.

More specifically, the Sloan Consortium defines an online class as one for which at least 80 percent of the content is delivered online. Blended instruction describes courses that have between 30 percent and 80 percent of their content delivered online. Face-to-face instruction (traditional and Web-facilitated) might provide up to 29 percent of course content online, including syllabi and assignment materials.

The Instructional Technology Council applies similar definitions, noting that institutions typically employ a mix of course strategies across their curriculum. According to ITC's distance education survey results for 2009, 75 percent of respondents reported offering online courses, while 15 percent offered blended or hybrid classes. Reflecting the trend toward greater use of technology-mediated instruction in the traditional classroom, 53 percent of respondents said they continue to increase the number of blended and hybrid courses each term, and 77 percent reported continuing to increase the number of classes that are Web-assisted, enhanced, or facilitated.

further growth of e-learning (see sidebar, "Distance Learning Resources"). Providing online and blended programming can help institutions either round out lagging site-based enrollments or accommodate more learners beyond their physical campus capacity, explains Hartman.

Not a week goes by that he doesn't get a phone call from someone wanting to hear more about Drexel's online learning model. In 1996 the university launched Drexel eLearning Inc. (DeL) as a for-profit subsidiary to allow it the freedom to grow at its own pace and in response to market demand. (Read a profile of DeL in the March 2007 issue of *Business Officer*.) In what has become a highly competitive marketplace for online learners, DeL's niche *is* the Drexel brand, notes Hartman.

"Anyone who is aware of the quality of a Drexel degree is our target market," says Hartman. "While everyone talks about the convenience of online learning, I think the marketplace has moved beyond that. Convenience is no longer a distinguishing characteristic. Ultimately, it's about quality and brand." However one defines quality—whether it's the relevance of the content and its delivery, interaction with faculty and students, or the level of technical support—those factors become the currency for judging any online program, argues Hartman.

For the past six months, DeL leaders have been studying the marketplace to determine new program opportunities and student markets. While no final decisions have been made, one sector that Hartman believes holds promise is K–12. As public secondary schools across the nation struggle with their own budget shortfalls, why couldn't higher education step in, wonders Hartman. "If an advanced placement English teacher is retiring, do you hire a replacement, or can some of those courses be outsourced to a local college or university?" In such a scenario, schools stand to save real dollars, students gain online learning experience, and the university benefits through exposure of its campus and programs to potential new students, explains Hartman.

A New Melting Pot
In Drexel's case, no distinction is made between an on-campus Drexel University degree and an online DeL degree. The content and rigor are the same, and on-campus and online students pay the same tuition, notes Hartman. In response to DeL's success, the university formed an online learning council under the provost's leadership to ensure program quality and consistency, increase retention, and properly scale fast-growing programs so that needed services are in place to provide online learners with an experience as close as possible to that of Drexel's on-campus students.

Although some within higher education still tend to view classroom instruction as *real* education, with this "other online stuff" as ancillary, Marie Cini sees the industry moving steadily toward online and blended learning environments (see sidebar, "Online Defined"). Forward-thinking CFOs, provosts, and presidents will have to envision their institutions as physical spaces for traditional interaction *and* as cyber campuses that provide new ways to learn, argues Cini, vice president and dean of the School of Undergraduate Studies at University of Maryland University College (one of the online learning business models to be profiled in-depth in the March 2011 *Business Officer*). "We have to stop thinking of online education as separate," says Cini. "How we reach students or how they come to us is really a secondary matter. It's all education."

Williams concurs. Institution leaders must also begin to see all students as

requiring the same level of quality service and attention. Some happen to attend on campus in physical classroom space, some attend fully online, and some may do a little of both. Currently 28 of the degree programs offered by NCCCS institutions allow students the flexibility to choose online, on-campus, or some combination. Because of the new levels of support required by online learners to help make their transactions seamless, Williams predicts that distance learning programs will actually enhance service for all students as institution leaders figure out how to provide consistency across all channels of access. This process won't be static,

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>
> **Marie Cini, University of Maryland University College**

warns Williams. As technology continues to expand the ways that students can receive instruction, greater work will be needed on the content development end, in particular, to design truly multimedia courses that are accessible using smart phones and whatever other new devices come down the pike.

Like many higher education institutions, Drexel faces the inevitable blurring of on-campus versus online and traditional versus adult learner student populations. "Even now, younger students are looking for options to have the best of both worlds, where they might come to campus one day and the rest of the week they continue their studies online," says Hartman. While students may still want a residential experience for social reasons, actual learning may evolve to a primarily online experience that is supplemented with face-to-face discussions and learning activities, notes Hartman. "Institutions that are prepared to deliver the same

quality education in whatever format students prefer will have the edge."

So too will those institutions that figure out how to customize learning for students regardless of whether they attend online or in a traditional classroom setting, says Chaloux. He believes the notion of competency-based learning models will pick up steam in coming years, in part because more students will be unwilling to pay tuition and fees to review what they've already mastered. "At first this will create great havoc for many institutions as they scramble to create modular approaches to courses that allow students to spend time only on what they don't know," explains Chaloux. "The day is coming when we will begin to see greater distinctions in the marketplace with these kinds of programmatic angles or thrusts. I don't think every institution will, or ought to, go this route, and I don't believe traditional campuses will go away, but they certainly need to adapt."

Part of the Plan

In which new directions institutions spread their online focus may depend on how far they can stretch their dollars. According to the Sloan survey series, large public institutions have traditionally held the lead in the number of online offerings and online enrollment growth. These institutions also currently face the greatest budget pressures. How will this generalized funding squeeze affect online program growth at a time when learner demand is still in full swing?

The ITC survey likewise highlights this tension surrounding ongoing program support. Six years of data collection indicate that as online programs mature, they tend to be viewed as mainstream and thus are more likely to be incorporated into administrative structures that improve their chances for additional funding and staffing. At the same time, traditional administrative and academic units may feel threatened by the rapid growth of e-learning on their campuses. In such instances, distance education programs may experience push-back by some senior administrators and faculty members. In this regard, online programming may continue to struggle for acceptance and support from campus leaders who lack experience with these teaching methods and from senior administrators who may have little or no experience managing e-learning programs—even though they are the ones being asked to support new staffing, space, and budget requests.

All the more reason to give a formal structure to online education programs, says Williams. She chairs her system's commission on learning technologies. The group includes representation from faculty, student services, business services, and information technology. While each community college develops its own distance learning programming and is free to establish articulation agreements with other public and private institutions of its choosing, the system-level commission serves as a governing body to address common policy issues such as accreditation and ADA compliance as well as to develop protocols for online learning labs, help desks, and faculty training and professional development, explains Williams.

Absent some kind of formal oversight for e-learning initiatives, it can be difficult for institution leaders to get a comprehensive view of what's happening campuswide, says Williams. "While business officers may not directly oversee their institution's distance learning programs, they must understand the full breadth of costs and resource needs associated with these efforts," Williams argues. Depending on the structure of the institution, the business office might receive separate funding requests not only from different academic departments, but for different kinds of distance learning needs— from software purchases to faculty training to help-desk resources, she notes.

Williams advocates for a centralized distance learning team responsible for identifying the full scope of funding needs for all efforts and for developing a broad distance learning master plan for the entire campus. That alone would help leaders understand the scope and impact of their institution's e-learning initiatives so that they can better plan and budget for growth opportunities, says Williams.

One of the key conclusions of the ITC survey is that online programming may in fact represent the only real growth area for many institutions in the future. According to the survey's analysis, because of all that is entailed in developing content for new kinds of learners using new technologies, online programming has in many respects become a catalyst for institutions to grapple with issues of course design and quality, rigor of course content, student service and technical support, and assessment of student learning outcomes.

E-learning has not only come of age but has become a significant change agent for many campuses and a game-changer for even more students. Although accompanied by a steep learning curve, higher education's venture into online learning should serve the nation well as it launches into the task at hand—seizing upon that Sputnik moment to educate millions more students in the next decade.

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