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Public Policy on Distance Learning in Higher Education: California State and Western Governors Association Initiatives

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Abstract

The Western Governors University (WGU) and the California Virtual University (CVU) are revealing examples of the complex issues involved in implementing distance learning on the public policy level. Although technology is certainly important, it has masked the fact that the WGU and CVU initiatives mark the rise of learner-centered higher education and the increased role of business in the academy. In comparing and contrasting WGU and CVU, it is clear that the WGU is a more radical proposition because of competency-based credit and the connection with private industry. Two important issues driving public policy are raised in these two efforts: First, are the California and Western Governors Association initiatives the product of the commercialization of education or the result of a reform of higher education that may lead to an increased learner-centered orientation? Second, what is the appropriate role of private industry in higher education?

Introduction

Distance learning has become the focus of a great deal of attention in higher education circles in the past few years. While a fascination with the technology has led to enthusiasm from many, it has met with equally intense opposition from others. On the policy level, the Western Governors University (WGU) and the California Virtual University (CVU) are revealing examples of the complex issues involved in implementing distance learning. Although the technology is certainly important, it has masked the fact that the WGU and CVU initiatives mark the rise of learner-centered higher education and the increased role of business in the academy.

In comparing and contrasting these two policy efforts the following key issues emerge:

- private industry in higher education
- competency-based vs. seat time credit
- university governance/faculty labor issues
- accreditation
- education vs. training
- state residency and funding
- consumerism in education

I will not address here the learning theory debate about the validity or value of distance learning, but will instead focus on the policy issues, as well as the forces behind the policies. The overall organization of this article is to look first at the recent history of policy efforts in California and through the Western Governors Association, then examine the debate surrounding key issues, and finally draw conclusions which point to future directions in higher education policy.

History of Western Governors University

The official origin of the Western Governors University was a Memorandum of Understanding that followed the positive reception of a report called "From Vision to Reality." The memorandum cited specific needs that it wanted to address including access, affordability, and certification.

The strength and well-being of our states and the nation depend increasingly on a strong higher education system that helps individuals adapt to our rapidly changing economy and society; and States must look to telecommunications and information technologies to provide greater access and choice to a population that increasingly must have affordable education and training opportunities and the certification of competency throughout their lives (Western Governors Association, 1996).

In the subsequent Resolution 96-002 signed on June 24, 1996, the Western Governors Association also agreed to support collaboration with businesses, between universities, and among states on financial aid issues. The Governors charged a design team with creating a design plan for a virtual university describing how such an entity could be developed and financed. The primary elements of the mission of this entity adapted from the "From Vision to Reality" document were identified as expanding access, formal recognition of skills and knowledge, shifting the focus of education to competence from "seat time," and new approaches to teaching and assessment. The strategic implementation would be based on a market-orientation that is learner-centered, accredited, competency-based, regional and quickly initiated. In their prospectus, the design team identified their basic approach as creating broader markets for existing educational services, fostering the development of new products where unmet needs are identified, utilizing market mechanisms, and removing barriers to interstate flows of educational activities. Further, they identified the role of the WGU as to provide the means for assessing an individual's competence, act as a vehicle for identifying providers of educational programs, and to provide support services.

Most importantly, the prospectus advocated the creation of regional centers franchised by the WGU as points of access for services. These regional centers would not necessarily be existing educational institutions. Organizations will apply to become

regional centers and for-profit businesses will not be excluded. The WGU will also contract with providers of educational materials and assessment instruments. Essentially, the WGU is promoting the creation of both a consortium and a new educational institution which is separately accredited. The role of WGU will be to provide centralized governance, policy guidance and quality control.

Currently, the WGU is in a pilot phase. It is forming the administrative staff and has received "Eligibility for Candidacy" status from the Inter-Regional Accreditation Committee (IRAC). Initially it will focus on the offering of A.A. degrees and certificates rather than bachelor's degrees.

History of California Virtual University

In 1989 the California Legislature approved Senate Bill 1202 which directed the California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC) to develop a State policy on distance learning. The resulting report, "State Policy on Technology for Distance Learning" suggested a policy emphasizing equity, quality, diversity, efficiency, and accountability. However, largely because of the extreme funding cutbacks in the early nineties, the distance learning plans could not be implemented by the legislature.

In 1996 the economy began to turn around in California and the distance learning initiatives were picked up again. With the projection of 450,000 additional college-age students over the next 10 years in California by CPEC, the legislature looked at technology as a partial solution. CPEC subsequently wrote two reports, "Moving Forward: A Preliminary Discussion of Technology and Transformation in California Higher Education" (CPEC, 1996) and "Coming of Information Age in California Higher Education" (CPEC, 1997), which attempted to address the need for an overall state-wide approach to technology in education. A third report from CPEC which will focus on research in connection with distance learning theory is due to be released late in 1998.

Executive Order W-153-97 established the California Virtual University Design Team with the charge of recommending a blueprint to meet somewhat vague needs.

... by which California-based institutions of higher education may serve the needs of California students and employers through emerging technology-enhanced educational programs, as well as reach national and global demand for such programs and content (State of California, 1997).

In the 1998-99 budget, Governor Wilson has requested a total of \$14 million to encourage distance learning, with \$6.1 million specifically earmarked for CVU. Wilson's plans include \$1 million each for UC and CSU to develop online courses, and \$3.9 million for the California Community Colleges (Coleman, 1998).

Assembly Bill 2431 was introduced on February 20, 1998 paving the way for creating standards of distance learning practice in California and establishing the Matching Grant Program to assist California institutions in the development of distance learning courses. In the text of the Bill it is stated: "Distance education shall be utilized by the state to achieve its goals for education, equity, quality, choice, efficiency, and accountability (State of California, 1998)."

This Bill also advocates collaboration between the private sector and educational institutions. In relationship to industry involvement, AB2431 says:

The state shall encourage collaboration between the private sector and the educational institutions in the use of technology both to enhance the quality of education in the classroom and to expand and enhance the delivery of

educational services to homes and worksites.

In a separate but related effort called the California Educational Technology Initiative (CETI), the CSU system proposed an agreement with corporate sponsors to provide an infrastructure for distance learning at CSU campuses. Under great criticism by faculty groups and parties concerned with the business ties with CSU, the proposal is being revised and Microsoft has been dropped from the list of partners.

Analytic Comparison of WGU and CVU Efforts

The following chart shows the similarities and differences between the Western Governors Association and California State distance learning policies.

| | WGU | CVU |
|------------------------------|------------|------------|
| Competency-based credit | x | |
| Inter-State | x | |
| Learner-oriented | x | |
| Private Industry Involvement | x | x |
| Separately Accredited | x | |
| Brokering Function | x | x |
| Financial Imperative | x | x |
| Training Orientation | x | |
| Hardware Infrastructure | | x |

The Western Governors Association and California efforts are similar most importantly in their brokering management approach. As an article called "Western Governors U. Takes Shape as a New Model for Higher Education" in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reveals, the WGU sees itself to some degree as an enormous course broker: "Governor Leavitt, in fact, likens the new institution to 'a kind of New York Stock Exchange of Technology-delivered courses (Blumenstyk, 1998)." Although the WGU is seeking separate accreditation, it remains to be seen if it will develop its own courses to any extent. In this way, the WGU and CVU avoid obvious competitive battles with existing higher education institutions through a brokering mandate. However, this strategy also severely limits the real impact and value of both of these institutions. In looking at the present offerings of both the WGU and CVU, they are not very impressive. In fact, they are little more than a hodgepodge catalogue of previously existing courses with great differences in format and quality. While the number and quality of these courses is likely to improve, without new course development and overall academic planning the curriculum is likely to remain fragmented.

The Western Governors Association and State of California both are encouraging participation from private industry, which has opened them to criticism. Furthermore, the stated objectives of both organizations are similar in their declared aims of meeting changing student and business needs, providing access for the increased student population, and in increasing the quality of distance format courses.

While there are obvious similarities between the Western Governors Association and California State efforts at creating distance learning institutions, there are important differences. Overall, the Western Governors Association effort is both more ambitious and further developed. As reported in the "San Francisco Examiner," the WGU is

seeking separate accreditation while CVU will defer to the sponsoring university for credit.

The major difference between the two proposals is that students in the Western Governors 'distance learning' program would receive credit from the newly created 'WGU,' while those studying via the California linkup would receive credit from participating institutions--which may include Stanford University, UC Berkeley, USC and others (Raine,1996).

This necessarily gives California's effort less impact because students will not be able to complete a degree through the virtual university, only through individual institutions. Second, the WGU is a multi-state effort, while the CVU is exclusively based within California. This makes the WGU's implementation much more difficult--and ultimately more important if it is successful--because it will have addressed the serious financial, funding, and transferability issues that go along with interstate cooperation. In addition, the WGU has a training orientation in its initial curriculum and has decided to focus on A.A. degrees at the outset, rather than bachelor degrees. Undoubtedly this decision is a result of the influence of its corporate advisors--in particular Novell with its CNE training. It is difficult to tell if this emphasis on training and on A.A. degrees is a strategic marketing decision or an academic one. If it is an academic policy decision, the WGU has not explicitly excluded more advanced degrees from their plans at this time.

Training versus a traditional education model is clearly a preoccupation for the WGU. Conversely, California's effort focuses to a great extent on building a technological infrastructure for their three enormous higher education systems. While the Virtual University catalogue in California also lists independent institutions, they are left out of the infrastructure plans. As a consortium of various state and private institutions, the WGU has more difficulty addressing infrastructure issues by legislative measures.

Perhaps the single most important difference concerns the issue of competency-based credit. While California State is experimenting with competency-based credit at CSU Monterey, this is not part of the Virtual University planning thus far. For the WGU, competency-based credit is integral to the overall theory and implementation of their distance learning. The wide-spread implementation of competency-based credit would in fact be revolutionary in its affect on higher education administration.

Analysis of Central Issues

Competency-based Credit

Probably the most radical aspect of the entire WGU effort is its promotion of the complete reforming of university credit based on competency not seat time. While there is some precedent for this action in terms of high school diplomas based on comprehensive testing and limited credit for "life experience" at the college level, competency-based credit faces stiff opposition in terms of transferability and financial incentives for institutions. First, how will other academic institutions regard competency-based degrees from WGU in application to graduate programs? If the degrees are not recognized, this is going to severely affect enrollment. Second, how will universities be compensated for the granting of competency credit? If an institution has no financial incentive for the granting of competency credit, they are likely to see this approach as very much against their interests. As the WGU report entitled "The Policy

Environment for Implementing The Western Governors University" indicated:

The success of these new competency-based approaches will depend on changes in the financial incentives for both students and institutions. If the state's four-year institutions recognize that it is in their financial self-interest to emphasize competencies rather than course-specific credit hours in looking at potential student transfers, their attitudes may change regarding students whose competencies have been certified through the WGU (The Western Governors Association, 1996).

Furthermore, the WGU will need to develop very specific guidelines for the granting of competency credit. In "Concept Paper on System for Credentialing," the WGU puts forward basic premises and directions for the credentialing system they are likely to utilize. Their main premises are: 1) developmental-- focus on on-going diagnoses of the student, not just ending testing; 2) Non-exclusionary--open to everyone; 3) Non-punitive--students are given credit for passing certain sections of tests and will not need to retake those parts; 4) Portable-- transferable skills and knowledge which can be used in multiple settings. To any university administrator looking at this list, it would be clear that this kind of credentialing is going to involve a great deal of staff time. On-going diagnoses, non-exclusionary, modular and portable credentialing is likely to be very time-consuming and would change the role of the institution from teaching to assessing in a large way.

In California, higher education is moving much more cautiously into this notion of competency-based credit. CSU Monterey is one of the few institutions experimenting with competency-based credit in which at the end of their studies students are required to demonstrate competency regardless of accumulated credits or seat-time in order to receive a degree.

State Residency and Funding Issues

As they identify themselves in "The Policy Environment for Implementing the Western Governors University," the WGU has many problems to deal with in regard to residency and state funding including financial aid and residency tuition rates.

The problem is that existing state policies, even in their most fully-developed form, are increasingly inadequate to handle new forms of postsecondary delivery that make state boundaries essentially irrelevant. The issue of physical presence is at the heart of the problem...States are clearly in a period of uncertainty about how to address the challenge of educational programs offered through the Internet by providers with no physical presence in the state -- or in some cases within the United States. No clear legal or policy guidance appears to be available (The Western Governors Association, 1996, p. 3-4).

Most importantly, state authorization also plays a critical role in determining institutional eligibility for federal student assistance under Title IV of the Higher Education Act. How is this to be done with courses offered in cyberspace? Would no federal financial aid be available?

California avoids many of the problems that the WGU has by focusing on California residents. However, if the Virtual University draws students from out-of-state to credit courses, they also will have to deal with financial aid and funding issues as

well.

Accreditation

The WGU sought separate accreditation and on May 8, 1998 received notification of gaining "Eligibility for Candidacy" status through the Inter-Regional Accreditation Committee (IRAC) (The Western Governors Association, 1998). IRAC was formed through the collaboration of four regional accrediting associations including North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges, and the Western Association of School and Colleges. As a group, the four associations granted IRAC the power to develop an accrediting process for WGU. This represents a real change in accreditation practice and may be the most significant policy evolution to come about from the efforts of WGU. However, serious questions remain for IRAC. Can a consortium of universities without separate faculty have its own accreditation? In addition, how will IRAC deal with competency-based credit?

Financing

State financing policies also are a hurdle for the WGU. Public policies regarding financing of postsecondary education, both federal and state, are usually based on a measure of clock- hours of instruction. In contrast, the WGU will certify learning on the basis of assessment of competencies. Consequently, it is a real question as to how states can allocate resources for the WGU.

Private Industry in Higher Education

For many critics of the use of distance learning in higher education, the issue is not the use of technology but the perceived commercialization of the academy. The strong reaction to The California Educational Technology Initiative (CETI) proposed by CSU to contract with four large technology corporations (Microsoft, GTE, Fujitsu, and Hughes Electronics Corp.) to provide technology and networking to CSU campuses is a current example of this reaction. The deal was put on hold at the end of 1997 when faced with widespread criticism from students and non-participating companies with complaints about the privatization of CSU as a whole. The agreement has now been delayed until the May, 1998 Board of Trustees meeting. However, the state's legislative counsel, Bion M. Gregory, released a 27- page review of the plan at the end of January, 1998, with the opinion that the deal was illegal because it would put the university in the role of a profit-making entity (Young, 1998). Contrary to this opinion, others defend the agreement because it provides much needed funding for technology infrastructure and allows for open bidding for services and equipment. Furthermore, it is argued that the agreement does allow CSU to go to other providers for a lower price if necessary (Wilson & David, 1998, p. B15).

University Governance

As a Los Angeles Times article suggests, this conflict between the corporate and academic worlds is centered on the issue of university governance.

Underlying the misgivings of many academics about the trends illustrated by CETI, the THEN and virtual universities is the suspicion that administrators, legislators and university trustees, under pressure because of

mounting technology expenses, are capitulating to the high-tech industry's political agenda, which is clearly hostile to educational principles such as faculty governance and social critique. In other words, some academics are starting to view their institutions as emergent clones of market-driven high-tech companies instead of as universities and colleges. Recent attacks on tenure across the country--a principle not coincidentally reviled by many high-tech leaders--only fuel such suspicions (Chapman, 1998, D6).

While there are real academic autonomy and quality issues at stake in this debate about the involvement of business in education, it is becoming increasingly clear that this is at least partially a labor issue. In fact, the strongest critics of CETI in California have been faculty groups. David Noble to some extent voices the viewpoint of some faculty members in seeing new technology as a tool in labor/management struggles: "As in other industries, the technology is being deployed by management primarily to discipline, de-skill, and displace labor (Noble, 1998, p. 7)."

Conclusion--Towards a Policy on Distance Learning in Higher Education

What are the political forces driving these two pieces of higher education public policy? For David Noble, distance learning is driven by business and university administration collaboration seeking profit and control: "a battle between students and professors on one side, and university administrations and companies with 'educational products' to sell on the other (Noble, 1998, p.1)." Do students want distance learning, or is it being forced on them by administrators and high tech corporations? In spite of Noble's argument, it is hard to ignore indicators such as the finding in the 1995 study from Washington State University which stated that "Teaching conducted only in the traditional campus classroom will not meet the public's demand for tailored educational services (Dillman, Christenson, Salant, Waner, 1995)." Furthermore, when the University of Colorado at Denver began to offer online courses this past year it found that out of 609 enrollments, 500 were also enrolled in regular courses and therefore did not need to take the courses because of geographic distance--they in fact for one reason or another preferred this delivery method (Guernsey, 1998). For Utah Governor Michael O. Leavitt, the people are demanding a virtual university: "This isn't something that we're inventing. The market is driving it. People are demanding it (Blumenstyk, 1998)." There are two central questions in this debate: First, are the California and Western Governors Association initiatives the product of the commercialization of education or the result of a reform of higher education which may lead to an increased learner-centered orientation? Second, what is the appropriate role of private industry in higher education?

In attempting to answer these questions, we need to examine the evolving role of higher education in society, the relationship between education and business, and the administrative structure of universities. For David Noble, the adoption of distance learning leads to the commercialization of higher education. For reformers such as Carol Twigg from EDUCOM and a member of the WGU design team, the traditional system is operating under a manufacturing model in which educational products are created and then pushed onto the marketplace regardless of student needs.

Our institutions are reminiscent of other kinds of industrial age organizations such as the factory and the department store--characterized by

size and centralization--in contrast to the distributed, networked organization and mail-order shopping services of the 1990s (Twigg, 1994, p. 4).

In business terminology, what Twigg is advocating is a marketing or pull strategy, rather than a manufacturing or push orientation. However, Noble and Twigg are talking from two completely different frames of reference. Noble sees higher education as being automated by distance learning, while Twigg envisions a redirection of education through technology so that it is more oriented towards student needs.

This automation versus redirection analogy is a revealing one because it is very much at the center of the debate regarding the implementation of distance learning in universities. Many of the issues and problems surrounding distance learning are a result of conceiving of the use of technology to automate traditional teaching. While there is a great deal of evidence and experience to show that distance learning through videotape and the internet can be very successful, conceiving of it as an imitation of the classroom experience leads inevitably to negative comparisons. In contrast to this, Twigg emphasizes an opportunity to employ a constructivist, learner-centered learning approach through the use of technology. In fact, constructivist learning theory is specifically mentioned in both CVU and WGU documents as an advantage of the use of educational technology in higher education. The public preoccupation and fascination with technology has masked the fact that the WGU and CVU initiatives are indicative of a broader debate about faculty-centered versus learner-centered education on both the level of learning theory and management in higher education.

What are the political forces which are putting these policy initiatives in the limelight? The single most important factor is the changing demographics of higher education leading to a great increase in the average age of students in higher education. One-third of all undergraduate-level and two-thirds of master's-level enrollments are part-time. The largest single demographic group among part-time degree students is women over the age of 35 years old (NUCEA, 1994). The Fielding Institute which offers PhDs through an innovative distance format program reports that their average student age is a remarkable 46 years old (WASC Annual Conference, 1998). Increasingly, the needs of the traditional 18-22 year old college student are being overwhelmed by a much larger and more demanding group of adults needing and wanting lifelong educational opportunities. This extreme change in the composition of the student body of the university is having a dramatic affect on higher education, one which is likely to be even more important than the effect of the G.I. Bill in altering the composition of American universities. What this means is that because the students are different their needs are different, and the function of the university is changing along with the new student body. The historical role of liberal arts institutions to provide a broad-based education which prepare young adults to become productive citizens is no longer appropriate for the majority of higher education students. Many of these students are already accomplished professionals with families who often are already actively involved in American society, and more importantly, the political system.

A second force behind public policy in higher education is business and the increased need for a skilled workforce. In *The Monster Under the Bed*, Stan Davis and Jim Botkin argue that we are seeing a transition of higher education from government control to business control as a result of the changing needs of students and the role of education moving increasingly towards preparation for a job. On local, state, national, and international scales, the demand for higher education is pushing universities to become more productive and efficient. Consequently, public policy makers are looking

increasingly towards business for answers. Universities are enormously labor-intensive endeavors as presently constructed. Faculty and staff costs make up approximately 80 percent of the budget of colleges and universities (Twigg, 1996, p. 5). It is a frequent complaint that the use of technology in higher education (and business for that matter) has increased expenses instead of lowering them. Furthermore, distance learning courses usually end up requiring more, not less faculty time. However, distance learning methods still offer the possibility of dealing with the enormous labor expense in a business-like manner by creating educational capital through technology products. As Carol Twigg points out in "Academic Productivity: The Case for Instructional Software, A Report from the Broadmoor Roundtable": ... colleges and universities need to find ways to substitute capital for labor in order to improve productivity (Twigg, 1996, p. 5)." Of course, this attempt to make higher education efficient by reducing labor costs is exactly why faculty members feel threatened. More importantly, it remains to be seen if technology will ever effectively reduce faculty labor expenses.

A third reason for this new "consumerism" in education is the ascendancy of the baby boom generation to political power. A highly educated group--not long removed from the curriculum power struggles of the 60s and 70s and often with college-age children--they are determined to see educational institutions become more responsive. While this generation does have respect for notions of academic freedom and the value of intellectual pursuits, they are suspicious of wasteful bureaucracies. These educational consumers see a great deal of inefficiency in traditional higher education and an alarming lack of attention to undergraduate education.

Some might argue the following: Surely a changing student population isn't reason enough in itself to reformulate what has been a very successful university system in the U.S. Presumably, students still go to school to learn from faculty. Students are not going to teach themselves. Students do not always understand a given academic field well enough even as adults to make good decisions about their own education. What is important here is to distinguish between learner-centered and learner-taught higher education. At a recent WASC annual conference (WASC Annual Conference, 1998) , Carol Twigg responded to a similar challenge by raising the analogy of the doctor-patient relationship. While patients do not want to perform surgery on themselves, in an age of managed-care dominance, they do want hospitals to be more responsive to their needs. The comparison is apt. For the most part, students do not want to teach themselves. However, to take this analogy further, do we want decisions made about our health and education based on the bottom line of a business? Isn't it important that some key areas of human endeavor be protected to some degree from the inevitable excesses of capitalism? Some might argue that non-profit higher education institutions are already dominated by financial decisions, and of course it would be very naïve to believe otherwise. However, non-profit institutions regularly make decisions which benefit and enrich their students based on their overall institutional missions which have nothing whatever to do with the bottom line. It is doubtful that profit-making educational institutions would act similarly. On the other hand, non-profit universities do have a great deal that they can learn from businesses, starting with the marketing principle of staying close to the customer (student). Additionally, the interests of businesses and non-profits do come together in the common goal of creating an educated workforce. Corporations have moved reluctantly into the business of educating and training their employees; and if higher education institutions become more responsive, businesses will gladly give up this role.

On the public policy level, the California and Western Governors Association initiatives reveal two different kinds of approaches to distance learning. While some

might describe the differences as being a centralized versus decentralized kind of opposition, they might better be described as faculty-centered versus learner-centered. The CVU is obviously much more conservative and anchored in the control of the existing educational institutions with its faculty governance schemes. Under this model, technology will be used to augment traditional classroom courses and probably only have widespread use through continuing education, which is historically much more market-driven and flexible. Clearly, with a proposed \$6.1 million in the coming fiscal year for the UC, CSU and community college system, the California Virtual University is a small effort. While it is difficult for anyone in the California Legislature to argue against technology in higher education, it is hard to not view this effort as something of a cynical public relations effort with little real consequence. It is unlikely that as presently conceived that the CVU will have much immediate impact on access to degree credit courses in California and will certainly have minimal effect in meeting the increased enrollment projections of Tidal Wave II. As CPEC concluded in its 1996 report "Moving Forward," California needs more aggressive leadership in higher education.

There appears to be widespread agreement among educational planners working on a regional basis that what California needs is leadership that moves public colleges and universities to a completely new paradigm that is student-centered (California Post-secondary Education Commission, 1996, p. 15).

The California Virtual University clearly does not represent an instance of this kind of leadership.

On the other hand, the WGU effort has higher education reform at its philosophical roots with the insistence on its own accreditation, competency-based credit, and partnerships with businesses with an eye towards training instead of education. Of course, because it is more ambitious, the WGU plans are going to be more difficult to implement. Nevertheless, the WGU is likely to have a greater impact on the future of higher education in the United States.

However, the WGU reliance on competency-based granting of credit is not without philosophical problems. Testing in education in America has reached epidemic levels, from continual preoccupation with the classification of K-12 students to graduate admissions tests. Traditionally, tests are designed to assess what students know, not what they have learned. In this way we are in fact already using a competency-based model in higher education. The difference is that we are also requiring a certain amount of seat-time regardless of ability or non-academic background. I think that the WGU competency-based model puts an unfortunate emphasis on competency instead of the learning process. Because the WGU is placing so much emphasis on a competency model, the assessment instruments used are going to have to be more than behavior-oriented standardized tests. While the WGU planners seem to recognize this in their planning documents, I think that it is going to be very easy to slip into a standardized test model. What is really missing in the assessment emphasis is adequate assessment of incoming students on a course-by-course basis. Certainly faculty members have been assessing students' needs on an ongoing basis in the classroom for years. If you remove the immediate contact with the instructor, how can higher education truly address individual needs without adequate up front assessment? Finally, can computer-based programs accurately assess the kind of complex knowledge striven for in higher education? On a practical level, this kind of assessment both incoming and

outgoing is likely to be very expensive if it is useful.

On the policy level, the most important new initiative would be one which gives funding to research projects leading to a better understanding of technology-enabled learner-centered education. In some ways the need is presently out-running the knowledge base in terms of the use of technology in the classroom. Some critics feel that institutions are jumping into distance learning before really understanding its value as an approach to learning. While there are thousands of research studies and many years of experience in various kinds of distance learning, there is a certain amount of justification in this viewpoint. Educational technology is still in its infancy. In many ways we are at a stage in education very similar to that of the early film industry, which began by simply recording Broadway stage plays. We are still imitating the classroom with educational technology and consequently offering once-removed imitations of the in-person experience. It was a number of years before film developed its unique language and power as a medium, and educational technology as a new medium faces this same developmental challenge. While we are still developing the language of technology-mediated education, the best use of public funds for distance learning might be in gaining a better understanding of these important new tools through research.

In looking to the future, public policy in relationship to distance learning must address the key issues of credit, transferability, financial aid, and interstate enrollment policies. These are all issues that the WGU is addressing and they are consequently playing an important role in the history of higher education. In terms of leadership at the policy level, the CVU represents a very modest effort to automate the existing faculty-controlled academic institutions. In the final analysis, the marketplace for education is going to be the most important factor, not public policy. If the state and federal government do not respond to the increased demand for learner-centered models of higher education, more flexible independents and for-profit institutions will meet the need. In fact, this is already happening. Nevertheless, I think that it is important on a policy level that the non-profit nature of higher education be protected. Higher education is simply too important on both a personal and social level to leave to the mercy of the free marketplace. The right of citizens to access affordable, quality education must be protected. However, those in non-profit higher education must make the argument that they offer something that the for-profit model will not or cannot. It must prove its value and not simply retreat into a divisive faculty labor stance that the public will view as self-interested. Furthermore, it must pay attention to the learner-centered demands of the public because the needs of the students have changed. Technology can help with this transformation and non-profit higher education would be best served by embracing these new tools rather than engaging in a self-destructive fight in which students will be the big losers.

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