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Based on regional and national perspectives developed by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), this chapter examines policy barriers to e-learning and related challenges community colleges must face if they are to create an open marketplace for e-learning.

Policy: The Inconspicuous Barrier to Expanding E-Learning in Community Colleges

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The chapters in this volume paint an impressive picture of the continuing development of distance education in the community college. Increasingly in the mainstream over the past decade, e-learning has been established as a central and critical way to serve students. In particular, e-learning helps community colleges move their goal of universal access “from promise to practice” (Web-Based Education Commission, 2000, p. iv).

Online learning has opened doors to higher education for many students otherwise restricted by fixed schedules and geographic obstacles. However, extending access to traditionally underserved citizens, such as working adults and rural populations, will demand a renewed commitment to establishing a ubiquitous and universally accessible network (Bohland, Papadakis, and Worrall, 2000). Despite extraordinary growth in e-learning programs, there are presently many fields in which e-learning courses are not available or programs are not complete. For example, adult literacy instructor training, workforce training such as in manufacturing technology and criminal justice, teacher training, and allied health lack effective online programs. Yet all these areas are central to the community college mission. More funding is needed, both in the form of direct subsidies for start-up costs and in subsidies to encourage institutions to fill such market gaps through online courses.

All but a small percentage of institutions currently offer online education, yet barriers exist to the continuing development and expansion of e-learning (Allen and Seaman, 2003). Chief among these barriers are policies

at the federal, state, and institutional levels that create unobtrusive but real impediments to e-learning. Most of these policies were defined and instituted many years ago in order to help students pursue higher education (Mingle and Chaloux, 2002; Voorhees and Lingenfelter, 2003). Written in a different time, for different students, and with different modes of educational delivery in mind, these policies still benefit some students but create barriers for others, particularly e-learners. This chapter examines these policy barriers, their effect on the e-learning movement, and what can be done to change, reduce, or eliminate them.

Policy Barriers to E-Learning

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) is a regional compact of sixteen southern states (Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia). Since its establishment in 1948, SREB has focused on increasing access to higher education in the South, ensuring educational quality, and serving students who have traditionally not been well-served by higher education. SREB has embraced technology and e-learning as ways to ensure access and quality education for all students in the region.

In the mid-1990s, SREB created a regional educational technology cooperative, and in 1997, launched the Electronic Campus, an electronic marketplace of online courses, programs, and services that now offers over nine thousand credit courses in more than four hundred degree programs at roughly three hundred institutions. Early in the development of the Electronic Campus, clear signs of serious policy challenges and barriers started to emerge. To respond to these challenges, SREB created the Distance Learning Policy Laboratory (DLPL) to study policy and to effect change. Working with over one hundred educators, distance learning experts, policymakers, and state leaders, the DLPL outlines policy challenges to distance learning and makes recommendations for addressing them in a series of reports (<http://www.sreb.org>). Policies in five areas have emerged as serious yet inconspicuous barriers to e-learning, particularly in community colleges: tuition, credit transfer, funding for e-learning, financial aid, and student support services.

Tuition. Higher education has become less affordable over the past few years in the wake of dramatic increases in tuition (Callan, 2002; College Board, 2003). Although tuition increases may be inevitable in times of state budget shortfalls, e-learning courses can be priced effectively if institutions use a market-oriented pricing structure and eliminate pricing based on residency.

Traditional methods of charging higher tuition and fees to out-of-state students are inappropriate, even unworkable, in e-learning. The high cost of out-of-state tuition, for example, may limit competitive marketing and

preclude a college's ability to achieve economies of scale in enrollment. Such out-of-date tuition pricing is also a significant barrier to e-learners who can access programs at colleges hundreds or thousands of miles away, yet cannot afford to take advantage of them. Furthermore, when both in-state and out-of-state e-learners use campus resources and instructional support services in the same way, variable rates based on residency do not make sense.

One approach to eliminating unnecessary e-learning barriers based on tuition is an electronic tuition rate policy currently being promoted in SREB states (Mingle and Chaloux, 2002). This policy allows institutions to establish a market-driven tuition rate for electronically delivered courses and programs that is independent of student residency. The potential benefits of this policy are significant for both students and institutions. Students gain access to a greater number of educational programs at lower prices and with reduced need for financial aid. Community colleges benefit from expanded markets, greater revenues and operating efficiency, better utilization of available capacity, and reduced expenses from unnecessary course duplication.

Credit Transfer. E-learning increases the number and availability of courses and programs, making it possible for more students to balance classes with work and family schedules; thus, it helps accomplish the community college's goal of universal access. Distance learners are able to choose from a wide variety of online courses designed to meet their particular learning needs, and many of them take courses at more than one institution at the same time. These multiple-institution students, sometimes called transients or cherry pickers, must navigate each institution's academic and institutional requirements in order to determine whether credit earned at one college will be recognized by another.

As the number of students who take online courses at more than one institution grows, incongruent credit transfer policies will create higher costs and make it more difficult for students to reach their educational goals. The promise of an education via technology is clearly undermined when students are required to repeat courses in order to meet a particular institution's degree requirements (Southern Regional Education Board, 2002a). Therefore, policies easing credit transfer should be adopted. This should first occur at the state level, but state systems of higher education can no longer work in isolation if e-learning is to grow to its full potential. Because e-learning is independent of physical place or state boundaries, new credit transfer policies and principles should also be adopted regionally, nationally, and eventually, internationally.

SREB has proposed a strategy to allow for more congruent credit transfer by establishing a *degree completer entity* in every state. A degree completer entity could be a virtual campus, a single institution, or a group of institutions that uses mutually agreed-upon criteria to integrate various course credits into meaningful, coherent degrees. Each state would identify one or more institutions or consortia to act as degree completers (Southern Regional Education Board, 2002a).

Another proposed strategy is to establish an *electronic regional transfer crosswalk* that would help students to predetermine graduation requirements and assess transferability of courses from one institution to another. This crosswalk could be built on existing state-based articulation agreements and could eventually extend across multiple states and the nation (Southern Regional Education Board, 2002a).

E-Learning Funding. Despite the growth of e-learning, many states and community colleges still treat it as a special budget item and fund it through onetime appropriations. Other states and institutions regularly fund but have yet to establish e-learning, and its accompanying technology infrastructure, as a core budget item. Current funding policies, although appropriate for traditional campus-based programs, fail to provide sufficient support or flexibility for institutions to expand e-learning programs and services (Southern Regional Education Board, 2002b). Traditional methods and standards of cost estimation such as lump-sum appropriations do not usually work well for e-learning; instead, states and community colleges should fund e-learning and associated technology throughout its life cycle. Allocations should incorporate incentives to support the change processes necessary for effective technology utilization and should be clearly correlated with important objectives to ensure accountability.

As with on-campus educational offerings, the primary costs in technology initiatives are not hardware or software but are the human resources or personnel infrastructure associated with faculty and instructional support staff. Funding policies must address these central and significant costs. Community colleges can reduce human resource costs by encouraging greater institutional support for faculty productivity and effectiveness, initiating cooperative activities that achieve both economies of scale and qualitative improvements, implementing team approaches to curriculum development, and encouraging and supporting the creation and effective use of digital learning materials (Southern Regional Education Board, 2002b).

Financial Aid. Although federal and state governments offer billions of dollars in financial aid, little is available to distance learners (Wolff, 2001). Indeed, financial aid mechanisms designed to expand access to higher education often limit aid for students who are not of traditional college age, do not attend full time, or do not enroll in on-campus classes (Carnevale, 2001a, 2001b). These barriers must be removed as soon as possible to allow the fastest-growing population of college students—e-learners—to receive financial aid.

Financial aid systems at all levels should remove or lessen financial barriers and make higher education available to all who can benefit. Thus, financial aid providers must widen their definition of a college student and become more responsive to the different ways, places, and formats in which students learn. To assist in this effort, policymakers should devise strategies to provide greater flexibility for e-learners and financial aid providers. Assessing the practicality, efficiency, and effectiveness of shifting financial aid disbursement from an institution-based to a student-based model is the

first step in this process. Community colleges should also promote changes in existing federal financial aid statutes and regulations and should redefine academic learning periods to allow institutions and students to use financial aid for overlapping academic terms, self-paced learning, short and sequential course enrollment, and multiple or rolling start dates. As well, community colleges and policymakers should develop procedures that permit specific e-learning expenses to be included in financial aid calculations (Southern Regional Education Board, 2002c). Finally, SREB advocates the development of a regional financial aid clearinghouse for e-learners. This clearinghouse would facilitate multistate and multi-institutional financial aid policies, and would especially benefit e-learners enrolled in more than one institution at the same time.

Student Support Services. Although community colleges have moved rapidly in the past decade to develop online courses and degree programs, few provide the full array of academic and administrative services necessary to support online learners (Southern Regional Education Board, 2002c; Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications, 2001). Policies that ensure e-learners have access to appropriate and adequate support services can be created in a variety of ways. First, community colleges in a particular state or region can collaborate to create economies of scale for online student services. By pooling resources, institutions can reduce costs and program duplication and offer greater depth and breadth of services. Community colleges can also employ learner-centered customer relationship management models to help ensure that instructional activities and support services truly meet student needs (Southern Regional Education Board, 2002c).

As Chapter Seven explains, many services designed for distance learners also serve on-campus students. Therefore, policies are needed to encourage moving traditionally campus-based services such as financial aid, admission and enrollment, registration, library and bookstore services, academic advising, career counseling, and skills testing to the Web. Significant modification may be needed to make some of these services available to e-learners, but the growing use of instructional technology in both on-campus and off-campus education makes these new delivery formats necessary.

Conclusion

E-learning has become a significant strategy in increasing access to higher education. However, community colleges are often hamstrung by myriad state and federal policies and practices that are ineffective or even deny access to e-learners. Community colleges must work to change policies on tuition, credit transfer, funding, financial aid, and student services that hamper access to e-learning. Because community colleges have strong links to local communities, are committed to e-learning, and can be flexible in response to changing market conditions, they can and should take a leadership role in developing better local, regional, and national e-learning policies.

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