Distance Education is a Strategy - What is the Objective

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The tools and techniques associated with distance education can be used to meet a number of social, political or business goals and their accompanying educational or training objectives. Strategic planning is a means for developing and verifying the fit between distance education and it's sponsoring goals. This paper reviews a number of strategic plans and the goals and objectives normally assigned to distance education. The objective of the paper is to develop further precision in the terms used in strategic thinking about distance education.

Strategic Planning and Distance Education

Strategic planning is an important function of leadership. Judging from the number of institutional strategic plans posted on the Web and the body of literature devoted to institutional strategic planning; it is one that is currently well attended to.[i] The key issue for distance educators at all levels, is how distance education is placed in the strategic planning hierarchy. Is it seen as an objective in itself or as a strategy for achieving other social, educational or business objectives?

There are about 2,000 strategic planning documents available on the Web, which mention distance education.[ii] Most of these are from traditional institutions of higher education. They represent whole university systems, individual institutions, colleges and departments and service units, such as libraries and information systems. A random survey of these documents reveals that they are about equally divided in placing distance education in the goals/objectives category and placing it as a strategy in service other specifically stated goals and objectives. [Distance teaching universities are a clear exception to this comment, since the place of distance education is inherently defined. The strategic plan of the Open University of Israel, for instance, is quite clear on its social and educational goals and how distance education will be used to meet them.[iii]]

The difficulty which results from not being clear about the function of distance education, can perhaps be illustrated in the following example.

> An educational institution decides to set distance education as a goal. Sub-units or individuals are then pressured to develop and offer courses. These courses, once offered, are judged against standard measures of benefit/cost, attendance, student ratings, faculty satisfaction, etc. and they are found wanting. The fallout from this can take many directions: blame the technology and search for a new technology: blame the offering unit, reorganize and create a new unit or decide that distance education itself is not workable.

This scenario is unfortunately familiar to many distance educators and the reader can probably fill in specific examples and add to the fallout list. Despite the current enthusiasm for distance education, failures that come from poorly defined or misplaced objectives will be harmful to the field in the long term.

The solution, of course, is care and precision in the way in which distance education is defined and discussed in the strategic planning process. The terms used in this paper follow a standard strategic planning hierarchy: vision, mission, goals, objectives, strategies and tactics.[iv] The author has attempted to use them carefully in the examples, which follow.

Objectives Defined

For the past ten years, the author has conducted distance education workshops for more than 500 corporate training managers and higher education faculty and administrators.[v] A consistent feature of these workshops has been a session to identify participant goals and objectives. These objectives have been collected by the author and categorized for both business and higher education.

The business objectives identified in these workshops include: overcoming logistical problems inherent in face-to-face instruction (i.e. Can't move enough people fast enough), consistency and economy. Other objectives include cross training, need for site based learning (because of job pressures or requirements for work-related training, team training, increased speed of delivery) necessary because of rapid changes in technology, workforce or the

legal environment), completeness of coverage and efficient use of scarce instructional resources. These objectives are often identified in service of larger business goals such as quality, service, innovation and cost containment.

Participants from educational institutions identified the following objectives: increasing enrollments, economies of scale, team teaching and sharing of courses with other institutions. Additional objectives included enhancing student flexibility (through time shifting -hour to hour, within a semester and load leveling – semester to semester, within a curriculum,) enhancing faculty flexibility (meeting classes from a distance, while travelling) and efficient use of instructional resources. Other objectives included: meeting minimum enrollment in specialized courses, bringing in outside experts, bringing in real-world case-studies, amortizing course development costs over large audiences, supporting graduate students in field placements and enhancing a curriculum with courses from another institution. These objectives were often seen as serving larger goals, such as improved access, quality, efficiency and competitiveness.

Objectives with Goals

Goal definition was not an explicit part of the exercise mentioned above. That is, participants were only asked to identify objectives, not to identify goals with accompanying objectives. Sorting these objectives into a hierarchy therefore involves inferring and labeling the goals to which they are subservient. The goal labels chosen are *access, reach, quality, efficiency and customer service*. The following section describes these goals, organizes the objectives to fit them and provides some examples of distance education strategies and tactics used to meet these objectives. It also, in some cases, describes salient problems and issues associated with the use of distance education as a strategy to meet these goals.

Access

The most common goal identified with distance education is *access*. It is also the most troublesome. In the strategic planning documents reviewed, this goal is not always defined. Neither was it defined by most workshop participants. When access is defined, it is generally in terms of service to students who are geographically isolated or who are otherwise place-bound or time-bound.[vi]

This definition, however, begs the question: access for whom, to what, and under what circumstances? It also makes the presumption that there are sufficient numbers of qualified and financially stable students in these target populations. Or that the institution is willing to pay a subsidy over long term. It further makes the assumption that sufficient instructional, administrative and technical resources can be found to meet these needs, at any price.[vii]

Access must also be differentiated a social goal or an educational goal. In Europe, the term ODL (Open and Distance Learning) is often used. This term is useful; because many distance teaching institutions are also open enrollment or "second chance" institutions. Their mission is to serve those who were not admitted to or otherwise able to attend a normal resident institution. In this case, distance education is clearly a strategy in service of wider participation in higher education. Combining the terms *open* and *distant* provides useful shorthand, since the goal of open admission and the strategy of distance education each define an important institutional feature.

In the United States, we have developed a community college system to serve the second chance function. When higher education leaders identify the goal of *access*, it does not normally mean open enrollment, but rather remote access to instruction, where admissions criteria remain unchanged. There are some exceptions to this with the new "on-line" universities.[viii] With open enrolment or relatively open enrolment, standards must be made an explicit part of the educational process, rather than being implemented through the admissions process.

Access is also important in a corporate setting. With more horizontal and open organizational structures a common business objective is broad employee access to training. Through distance education, a broad array of employees can be empowered to achieve education as opposed to the traditional tactic, where management selects a few individuals to attend a workshop. Cross training is an increasing requirement, which can often be served by distance education. Distance education also allows increased involvement of customers and suppliers in a corporate education program.

Reach

Reach is perhaps a better description of the distance education goals of most resident educational institutions. To expand geographic reach through distance education gives any institution a wider pool to recruit from. For some institutions, this may be useful to maintain or expand general student recruiting. For others, it is used to recruit students into specialized courses or programs, where critical mass cannot be maintained strictly on-campus.

Distance education tactics used to serve large enrolment programs normally employ mass media distribution mechanisms and require specialized off-campus administrative and support functions to be successful. These functions include promotion, registration, technical, and content support. Effectiveness in these functions requires a significant commitment. The tactics used to support specialized low-enrollment courses can be more hand crafted and rely on personal communications technologies. These tactics are quite different in their cost and complexity of implementation and they can be instructor-driven. They cannot, however, be stretched to serve large audiences. When reach is the goal, it is important for leadership to provide a clear identification of the objectives and the audience.

For an institution to reach beyond its normal borders, simply employing the strategies of distance education is normally not sufficient. Effective reach must be based on programmatic advantages, in terms of quality, variety or usefulness. It can include institutional advantages, such as reputation. It must also include effective marketing and promotion. Identification of these strategies, along with support services is a leadership responsibility. [ix]

In business and industry, reach is often associated with increasingly global operations and with expansion through acquisition. An education or training unit, which formerly served only one business unit or location, may now be required to reach out to many others. The issues for business are similar to those for education. Effective promotion is necessary. The scope and scale of the objectives will define the administrative support services required.

Quality

Many of the objectives listed above fall under the heading of maintaining or improving instructional quality. There is a reasonable body of literature on quality in education. Quality measures discussed below, include the variety and depth of course offerings within a curriculum, the educational results of any individual course, the consistency of results from one offering to the next and the amount of instructional support offered.

Distance education techniques can be used to maintain or increase the variety of course offerings, which is particularly important in graduate programs. The most common technique employed is videoconferencing, though computer communications and audio-conferencing can be used as well. Related specific objectives include: meeting minimum enrollments in specialized courses, conducting multi-campus graduate seminars and conducting seminars with industry and government research sponsors. Rounding out or enhancing a curriculum, with courses from another university is also a common objective.

Improving the quality of individual courses is a frequently stated goal across the curriculum and the use of distance education techniques can support many, quality enhancing educational strategies and objectives. Telecommunications technology can bring in the real world through speakers, experiences and events. It can also allow team teaching with colleagues from other universities. Benchmarking, which is a frequent quality improvement strategy in business and education can be facilitated through distance education.

Telecommunications and the Internet can also be used in improving contact and access and reducing travel, thus providing new opportunities for students. Supporting interns and residents in field placements is one such opportunity. Supporting graduate students in industry research placements and providing regular home office contact for industry researchers on campus is another.

A more pervasive (and currently hot) issue in quality enhancement is the use of Instructional Technology to enhance learning. This becomes a distance education issue, in that the *reach* provided by distance education

can provide the economies of scale which are often necessary to support the development of the simulations, visualizations and CBT that are associated with instructional technology.

In business, quality is often associated with consistency. A feature of distance education can be consistency of message, across time and across instructors. Though instructor independence can be built into any distance education program, it is a more common objective in business and government than higher education. Distance education tools and techniques can also support effective needs assessment at one end of the instructional design and performance assessment at the other, both of which are common quality improvement tactics in business education.

Efficiency

Another goal that is often associated with distance education is efficiency. This can be measured in terms of resource utilization, which in the case of education is primarily faculty and staff time. It can also improve the use of student time. When instructional technology is involved, distance education can improve utilization of laboratories and other physical resources through pre-training, orientation and follow-up.

Distance education tactics can enhance student efficiency by allowing time shifting - hour to hour, within a semester and load leveling - semester to semester, within a curriculum. The flexibility provided in these opportunities may decrease time to graduation of allow students to work or be more easily involved in athletics or other extracurricular activities.   On the faculty side, increased flexibility can allow meeting classes from a distance while travelling on research or lecture opportunities. It can also allow time shifting, hour to hour, within a semester to maximize efficiency of research or other projects.

The efficient use of scarce instructional resources is a salient objective in industry, where shrinking workforces and rapid changes in technology make the internal "content-expert" a precious asset, who's time is jealously guarded. It is also an objective in higher education, particularly in certain content areas. Computer science and some fields of engineering and biotechnology, for instance, have had to employ distance education as a strategy strictly to overcome instructor shortages.

In business today, efficient use of scarce student time is also an objective. Even when student time is not explicitly accounted for, managers in today's lean organizations are looking carefully at every demand on their employee's time. A few companies do directly measure and budget student time as a component of instructional cost. In some of these cases, student opportunity cost is evaluated as opposed to simply straight time. When student time is included in the budget, it is normally 65-80% of the cost of instruction. Those educational programs, which take into account student time, in their cost benefit calculations, can afford to spend significantly more on targeting (needs analysis) and preparation in order to save time in instructional delivery.

In higher education, there has also been some attention to the issue of student time as a limited resource. This is often phrased in terms of *time to graduation*, where supporting and extra semester of school is expensive to the student and the institution. It is sometimes considered in the design of graduate or professional programs, where students are difficult to recruit or are paid for their work. It may also be considered in terms of opportunity costs to working students in a program designed for adults.

Improving the simple cost-effectiveness of instruction (isolated from the rest of educational costs) is not an automatic result of distance education, as some would believe. There are, in fact, relatively few reported instances where distance education has produced significant cost savings, when other variables such as quality and completion are held constant. When saving do occur, they are often through economies of scale. These economies occur primarily in the presentation of information, rather than in student support, tutoring and evaluation. There are also some potential administrative economies that result from simply having a larger student body over which to allocate costs. Achieving cost reduction, however, usually means targeting cost reduction as an objective and then planning, measuring and evaluating specific tactics in relation to cost.

Customer Satisfaction

We tend to think of customer satisfaction as a business goal. It can also be a goal of higher education. Newer measures of education quality are surveying students 1– 5 years out of school, to measure their satisfaction with their education. Specific objectives associated with the goal are the perceived quality of the educational experience and the match between the education provided and larger life goals, like family and employment. In the business setting, customer satisfaction with education includes both the direct customer (student) and his or her manager. Measurements of improved effectiveness from education often include evaluations by students, their peers and their managers.

Distance education contributes to customer satisfaction through access, in allowing a student new opportunities and through contributing to the goals of improved quality or efficiency. It can also contribute directly through improving needs assessment, convenience of delivery, evaluation, responsive and support.

A key element of satisfaction is targeting of content. This is particularly true in a business setting, where educational content is expected to be directly applicable to business problems. Distance education technology can provide more detailed needs assessment and more frequent checks and revisions. Current course delivery through the Web, for instance, allows a wide variety of educational variables to be efficiently measured and tracked. In large-scale courses, distance education can now be used to support individualization of content. Through the use of media technology, whether videotape or the Web allows many instructional modules can be offered. Illustrations, examples and case studies can be customized to give students choice and variety. As commercial traffic in individual educational objects increases, this type of customization will become possible, even in small-scale courses.[x]

Responsiveness can be decreased by the element of distance. Tools such as email and the Web can also increase it. The 7x24 availability of content support and interaction that is developed through the Internet can be used to support the objective of responsiveness.

In many cases, distance delivery forces additional attention to instructional design. This also leads to improved customer satisfaction. The details of this improvement have been discussed above as improved targeting, responsiveness, variety, efficiency and effectiveness. The overall impression of improved quality through improved design is however, often reported.

Convenience is a very salient aspect of customer satisfaction with education. The level of apparent convenience is based on the relationship of the delivery method to the mobility of the customer. Today's busy and highly mobile learners are requesting equally mobile and time flexible delivery. This accounts for part of the emphasis on desktop conferencing and asynchronous learning. In earlier times, distance delivery to a nearby learning center was considered to be the essence of convenience.

Conclusion

There are many choices to be made in distance education, including target audience, content and method. Once these choices are made, the tactics available to distance education include mechanisms for administration, content delivery, instructor interaction, support and evaluation. Making these choices in support of a set of goals and objectives allows measurement of the tactic, the objective and the goal. Making these choices without guiding objectives allows only simple performance measurements of the tactic, which cannot and should not be expanded to an evaluation the objectives and goals. If a program sent out on television fails to achieve an audience or has a high dropout rate, we need to know a good deal about the educational goals and objectives behind television delivery to evaluate that failure. Unfortunately, when distance education itself is objective, it is distance education that fails and we learn nothing about the broader goals and objectives. The same result occurs when a program succeeds.

Clarity and precision in the definition of goals and objectives will also increase the chances of enlisting faculty, students, alumni and external supporters - who can then see whether the goals underlying distance education match their own goals. This issue may not seem important in the short term, given the current widespread acceptance of distance education, but it is important for the long-term success of the field.

[i] In addition to the many individual plans available, there are also a large number of documents and publications related to the strategic planning process. The State of Arizona, for instance, provides a very nice on-line guide to strategic planning, <http://pubrec.oir.arizona.edu/uaplan/plan_docs/ospb_manual/where.html>

[ii] This search was performed during May of 1998, using the terms < "strategic plan" AND "distance education"> in the *Alta Vista* search engine. The author sampled and read 5% of these planning documents.

[iii] <http://www-e.openu.ac.il/index.html>

[iv] See, for instance: *The Board Member's Guide to Strategic Planning: A Practical Approach to Strengthening Nonprofit Organizations* (Jossey-Bass Nonprofit Sector Series) Fisher Howe, Alan Shrader, 1997.

[v] The workshop has been titled *Using Distance Education for Employee and Customer Training.* It has been offered once or twice a year since 1977. About 70% of the participants have come from business and industry, the rest from education – primarily higher education.

[vi] See, for instance, the University of Hawaii <http://www.hawaii.edu/admin.htm> or the University System of Maryland <http://www.umsa.umd.edu/usm/recomm.htm>

[vii] Resources such as computer support are in short supply in public sector. Library funding is also challenged.

[viii] See, for instance, the University of Colorado, <http://www.cuonline.edu/pub/index.real>

[ix] Michael Moore and Greg Kearsley, *Distance Education: A Systems View*, Chapter 1, Wadsworth Publishing Co, Belmont CA, 1996.

[x] The Instructional Management System initiative, which is sponsored by Educom and a number of university and private partners, will promote the identification and exchange of individual educational objects as well as whole courses. Additional information can be found at <http://ims.org>