
Regional

Distance education more expensive than thought

Cost is one of the big issues facing higher education. Diminishing government funding has spiraled the expense of attending public colleges and universities, which, in turn, has increased the debt burden on students to more than a trillion dollars.

Facing this issue has become a national concern for many politicians. State legislators and governors, as well as executives of some for-profit education companies, have been pushing distance education (mostly in the form of on-line courses) as the solution.

However, many of us who have been watching the development of these courses in our institutions have had our doubts not only about their effectiveness, but also about the claim that they will help to reduce the cost of attending college.

Now a report published just a few days ago are confirming our suspicions. The report in question, titled "WCET's Distance Education Price and Cost," concludes that these courses end up costing more than traditional courses. According to this study, more than half (54.2 percent) of respondents report that distance students pay more than on-campus students when tuition and fees are added. About three-quarters (75.1 percent) of institutions that participated in this study indicated that tuition was the same, but the added fees continue to result in a higher price to students of distance courses.

WCET stands for WICHE (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education) Cooperative for Education Technologies. The very fact that this organization, founded in 1989, has been advocat-

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ing for years the use of distance learning among institutions of higher education makes the report even more credible.

The study was conducted in 2016 and looked at 197 survey respondents who are on the front lines of offering distance courses. The authors also conducted interviews with leaders who have researched this issue to gain their insights on the future of distance education.

Some of the basic questions asked included, "What do you know about the price and cost of distance education? What do you charge students? How much does the institution spend to create these courses?" These questions reflected the long-held assumption that the price paid by students enrolled in distance courses is less than courses taught on campus.

Further, the detailed questions asked during the survey of distance education professionals asked about the cost of 21 educational components in four categories – preparing, teaching, assessing students and supporting faculty and students – involved in creating and delivering distance courses. The results reveal that for 12 (57.1 percent) of the components, the respondents thought there was no difference in the costs between distance courses and traditional ones. Nine (42.9 percent) of the components respondents thought

that distance courses cost more, and, in some cases, much more. More significantly, respondents did not identify a single component of a distance course at their institution that costs less than delivering a traditional course.

One of the conclusions the authors of this report made was, "It's our belief that all parties involved in setting the price for distance education courses need a dose of the realities."

To make things more complicated, now some politicians are engaged in setting ceilings on the price charged for distance courses. In Florida, the state legislature created "University of Florida Online," which is mandated to charge a price that is 25 percent lower than on-campus offerings. The governor capped the distance education fees and even threatened to eliminate them. What this does is to introduce an artificial and distorting financial factor that sets up the whole enterprise to fail, given that it artificially imposes prices that have nothing to do with the real cost of providing those courses.

Another disrupting factor in this whole picture is the fact that when distance learning was created in the early 18th Century, its original intent was to overcome the barriers of place and time, not to control costs.

Further, part of the political agenda of expanding the use of distance education is to reduce the use of faculty, not only because most of the budget of institutions of higher education goes into personnel, but also because it is a way to weaken a system that many politicians see with suspicion

– including such unique characteristics as tenure, sabbaticals, research expectations and the like. Many of these politicians see those peculiarities as a waste of resources.

Yet, this report clearly shows that on-line learning does not lower costs, but rather increases them.

To the issue of cost we need to add the fact that – as many studies have shown – distance education is not right for everybody. Only students who are already well educated and have financial means tend to do well.

Do the results of this study mean that there is no place for distance education in colleges and universities? Not necessarily. It should be an option, particularly for students who live in rural areas far away from traditional campuses or for people who already have a job and whose only opportunity to attend college is by taking online courses.

Based on both cost and effectiveness, distance education is not the panacea for the many financial woes facing higher education today, problems that have been caused by the lack of financial support for public education. Further, we need to understand once and for all that education is a human activity for which direct human contact is essential, particularly for those students who, because of their socioeconomic background (financially challenged, first-generation college students, etc.) need that direct human intervention.

It is time to look at the numbers and make well-informed decisions when it comes to the illusion that this "technological fix" is the answer to