

Book Review – Online Learning as a Strategic Asset

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Book Review

Online Learning as a Strategic Asset

Authors: S. McCarthy and R. Samors (2009). *Online Learning as a Strategic Asset, Vol. 1: A Resource for Campus Leaders*. Washington DC: Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities. Available from <http://www.aplu.org/NetCommunity/Document.Doc?id=1877>

Author: J. Seaman (2009). *Online Learning as a Strategic Asset, Vol. 2: The Paradox of Faculty Voices*. Washington DC: Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities. Available from <http://www.aplu.org/NetCommunity/Document.Doc?id=1879>

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The two-volume study, *Online Learning as a Strategic Asset* (recently published in print and online), is a joint project of the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities and the Sloan National Commission on Online Learning. It reports the results of a benchmark study intended mainly as a planning resource for campus leaders. Volume 1 focuses on online learning as a vehicle for advancing an institution's strategic goals; volume 2 examines faculty views and experiences in online teaching. The title of chapter 5 in volume 1 nicely encapsulates the scope as well as the value of the entire work: Dispelling Myths, Raising Questions, Creating Opportunities for Dialogue. In an era when many institutions are finally embracing online learning, yet few recognize the strategic value of such an initiative, it is critical that decision-makers know the right questions before they can arrive at useful responses.

These relatively slim volumes present findings and recommendations based on 231 interviews at 45 public institutions and on close to 11,000 responses to a faculty survey. The nearly 100 pages of text are augmented by several appendices, including lists of the participating institutions, the interview and questionnaire design and methodology, and the research instruments. The report is a publication that more scholarly types might question as a worthwhile contribution to the literature in this field, but I suspect that many practitioners will likely appreciate its merits. True, it does not add to the field's theoretical foundations, nor does it claim to do so. Rather, this material is especially well suited for administrators who are non-experts in distance education and who require succinct and accessible information to guide their planning.

In this regard, I am reminded of a recent conversation with a campus academic leader who asked me to recommend a source that would inform him of what he needed to know, distilled to its essence, to best advance the institution's emerging distance education agenda. I immediately

thought of this publication because of its straightforward style and its no-nonsense recommendations, which, while sensible, are often overlooked (e.g., establish an institution-wide planning group to guide and monitor the process). Part of its inherent appeal is that the advice is based on responses from the very constituencies this decision-maker must be attentive to, especially going forward within an environment that has yet to demonstrate widespread enthusiasm for online education.

The working premise of this project is that as technology increasingly pervades society, our academic institutions “risk becoming ‘obsolete’ if they do not adapt to changing demographics and market forces.” The report puts particular emphasis on the finding that although close to half of the responding CEOs recognize there is some strategic value in offering online courses, less than one-half actually include online education as part of their strategic plans, even as enrollments surge in many of these institutions. This disparity, plus the relative lack of knowledge that campus leaders possess regarding faculty attitudes toward, and involvement in, online instruction, further diminishes the potential of online learning as a strategic institutional asset.

An especially appealing aspect of this resource, and one which those lacking experience in this domain will hopefully benefit from, is its effort to dispel many prevailing myths about what distance education is and what it is not. At the same time, it also provides useful data-driven evidence to those who already know the virtues of online education by highlighting findings that experienced practitioners can tout as more than simply anecdotal reporting. A particularly compelling phenomenon that is documented is that once faculty members gain experience with online teaching they are overwhelmingly positive in their perception of its quality, compared to their peers who have had no prior experience (80% of whom, nonetheless, are convinced it is inferior to face-to-face courses).

The findings, though aimed at public universities, are equally relevant for private colleges as no institutions today can afford missteps in such a complex enterprise. The history of various attempts to initiate distance education offerings is not especially inspiring, but it is cautionary in that many failed efforts have dissuaded those prospective providers of online educational opportunities from any further activity in this arena. As a consequence, in addition to limiting universities’ ability to become more relevant in the digital age, the lack of success due to inadequate planning has also reinforced those skeptics who remain convinced that it is not a viable or credible means of teaching and learning.

But it must be noted that however insightful or accessible a particular set of guidelines might be in advancing institutionally sponsored online learning it simply will not occur without appropriate institutional leadership. And while decision-makers need not be experts in this field, they must at least recognize the potential of online education for their institutions and be willing to create the conditions for innovation in this direction. This will best happen if they manifest transformative leadership. Yet, typically, campus leaders ascend to senior roles via a largely transactional style that is focused more on relationships within the existing environment than on promoting bold action that transforms their institution and brings it to a new place. If there is any area of

engagement that truly requires transformative leadership, it is in the advancement of online education, not to supplant face-to-face instruction but rather to augment conventional approaches.

Many universities thrive on preserving traditional practices, rather than on fostering technology-enhanced pedagogy. When they do recognize that such initiatives may not threaten their legacy, after all, they too often lack any viable mechanisms that can contribute to planned systematic change. And entering the brave new world of distance education is not so much about selecting appropriate technology; rather, it is about managing change. This change process requires that leaders articulate and arrive at an inspirational and doable mission for their organization, that they empower and energize followers to implement that mission, that they be aware of their various stakeholders' values and needs, that they integrate congruent values into the organizational culture, and that they press their institution to improve continuously with minimal disruption and resistance. If there is merit in this approach to becoming relevant in the digital age, *Online Learning as a Strategic Asset* can indeed be a valuable instrument to achieve this goal, provided it gets sufficient attention from campus leaders. The task is too important not to succeed!

