

(Invitational piece to appear in the Cornell Magazine Mar/Apr 2001)

Beyond eCornell Distributed Learning Possibilities and Opportunities

Last October, following a sometimes-contentious debate, Cornell staked its first institutional claim in the world of Internet-based education by founding eCornell as an independent, for-profit corporation (www.eCornell.com). With offices in Ithaca and New York City, that venture is developing non-degree, non-credit-bearing educational programs. Nevertheless, many other, even more important uses of this technology would enhance Cornell's mission in its significantly more important (and not-for-profit) roles—and these deserve serious exploration too.

We are New York's land grant university, so we have obligations to serve society beyond the boundaries of campus. Because this emerging technology will enable us to enhance our traditional roles, I've endorsed EDUCAUSE President Brian Hawkins's suggestion that "distributed" rather than "distance" learning more appropriately describes Internet-based education. In stark contrast with eCornell, our primary distributed-learning audience should be our residential students. In addition, we should serve the educational needs of our faculty and staff more effectively. We can and should expand the lifelong learning opportunities for our graduates. And we have a marvelous opportunity to revitalize our direct outreach to society through this technology. Consider the following:

Residential students. We could enhance their educational experience by developing media-rich, interactive course components to relax our heavy dependency upon lectures. We need not impose a lock-step pace for all students. One friend of the university suggested we consider making it possible for undergraduates to cope with rising costs by allowing them to reduce their semesters in residence. Effectively, we'd be creating our own version of advanced placement credit while still preserving access to Cornell-quality courses.

Faculty and staff. We should consider using Internet technology to expand their educational options. Both groups have a need for self-renewal but limited flexibility for scheduling courses during regular hours.

Alumni. We might serve our former students more effectively by substantially expanding lifelong learning opportunities to support their career changes or new intellectual interests. The School of Continuing Education and Summer Sessions already offers some options (<http://cybertower.cornell.edu/demo/>). I urge that we consider making a Cornell degree more attractive, as suggested by former Vice Provost Kenneth King, by providing a lifetime warranty on a Cornell education. We should offer alumni a large selection of non-credit, refresher, and exploratory courses on a not-for-profit basis. Perhaps we could offer one free course every five years, making a Cornell degree even more distinctive and sustaining.

Other. Our traditional outreach programs, such as Cornell Cooperative Extension and ILR Extension, could be made more widely accessible. We might consider creating enhanced linkages with rural high schools or the SUNY community colleges. Former Vice President for Research Norman Scott argues that technology-mediated learning holds great promise for international education. Another faculty colleague, David BenDaniel, advocates using this technology for virtual campus visits by experts from outside academia who might not have the time to travel to Ithaca.

Content, Content, Content. As suggested by colleague Donald Greenberg, the focus of the faculty should be upon developing content. We also must develop the pedagogy needed to improve learning in this environment. To do this, the faculty must have access to an appropriate infrastructure and support to develop and deliver the materials. Whenever feasible, we should contract with others to provide the rapidly changing technological infrastructure and personnel needed to deliver content to off-campus students. We should ask Cornell faculty members to concentrate on the creation of the content and its delivery to our residential students. We should consider taking a “wholesale” rather than “retail” approach—that is, we should seek to become a digital publisher of content rather than an online university having responsibility for interacting personally with the non-resident end-users.

Finally, a robust distributed learning effort could provide enhanced employment in Ithaca, a step that could help us attract better faculty. Finding suitable, simultaneous employment for dual career families in Ithaca’s job market is already limiting faculty recruitment, and this challenge will surely increase. Similarly, we could also expand options for senior Cornell faculty who might otherwise choose to continue full-time employment. Such changes may have an even greater impact upon Cornell than distributed learning itself.

These views have been shaped by many conversations with my colleagues. The Faculty Senate’s executive committee has endorsed them as the basis for stimulating a campus-wide dialogue via a University Faculty Forum this spring. On behalf of the Cornell faculty, I encourage the readers of *Cornell Magazine* to share their views and advice with us in our attempt to create a vision to inform the evolution of distributed learning at Cornell.

— J. Robert Cooke

Dean of the University Faculty

jrc7@cornell.edu