THE IMPACT OF DISTANCE EDUCATION ON HIGHER EDUCATION:
A Case Study of the United States

Gail D. CARUTH (Corresponding Author)
Department of Educational Leadership
Texas A&M University-Commerce
Commerce, Texas USA

Donald L. CARUTH
Independent Management Consultant
Texas USA

ABSTRACT

Distance education has been credited for bringing education to students who would not otherwise have educational opportunities. This study used a qualitative case study approach to examine the research to determine the impact of distance education on higher education in the United States.

This look into the impact of distance education is significant to higher education because informed knowledge of the impact will provide insight into the effects of overall education in the United States. The researchers asked the following two exploratory questions: What happened during the evolution of distance education in the United States? What themes emerged over time?

The findings suggested that the impact of distance education on higher education in the United States has been change. It can be anticipated that in the future changes will continue to occur. Consequently, higher education has to be prepared to teach about change and teach students how to handle change.

Keywords: Distance education, online education

INTRODUCTION

A century ago higher education appeared to be a facing a technological revolution. The proliferation of a contemporary communication system—the United States Postal Service—a powerful innovation made education possible beyond the physical boundaries of university campuses. In order to enroll in a class in higher education, now one only needed a mailbox. Frederick Jackson Turner, legendary University of Wisconsin historian, claimed at the time that distance education was available to all Americans across the country. Universities realized that the US Postal Service provided educational opportunities to students and financial opportunities for themselves. Colleges and universities began to develop correspondence courses and establish correspondence departments. Courses at a distance, by mail, had become the craze by the 1920s. Four times as many students were enrolling in correspondence courses as were enrolling in all other higher education courses combined (Carr, 2012).

The dreams for this primitive form of distance education were more than just access to an education for students. Educators believed that correspondence courses would be better than face-to-face courses because correspondence courses could be designed according to individual students.

The University of Chicago's Home-Study Department, one of the nation's largest, claimed that students would receive individual attention and they could work on assignments at a time and location that was convenient for the student. Administrators claimed that correspondence courses provided for more personal relationships between students and instructors. Courses could be taught according to students' individual learning styles. Therefore, education delivered by mail would be better than education delivered in crowded classrooms (Carr, 2012).

During the past decade, higher education has been facing another technological revolution. The proliferation of a contemporary communication system- the World Wide Web -another powerful innovation again making education possible beyond the physical boundaries of university campuses. Online education has been acclaimed for bringing education to students who would not otherwise have the opportunities to go to college (Carr, 2012).

The purpose of this study was to examine the research to determine the impact of distance education on higher education in the United States. This look into the impact of distance education is important to higher education because informed knowledge of the impact will provide insight into the effects of overall education in the United States. The researchers asked the following two exploratory questions: What happened during the evolution of distance education in the United States? What themes emerged over time?

Distance education has taken different forms over the years. It has been defined as education utilizing one or more technologies to deliver instruction to students separated from instructors to support interaction (United States Government Accountability Office, 2011). In other words, students and instructors need not be present or accessible simultaneously. According to Lawrence Wood (2013), "face-to-screen learning" (p. 1) *via* the World Wide Web provides students with the convenience to obtain an education while living in their own homes and retaining their jobs rather than relocating to campuses.

Furthermore, students who might not have the opportunity to get an education are able to earn degrees (Caruth & Caruth 2012; Caruth & Caruth; n.d.a.). Students also gain benefit from the global perspectives provided by online learning, a contemporary form of distance education. The idea that students living on campuses will be taught by resident faculty at specific points in times is becoming passé. Higher education is moving from the traditional ivy-covered buildings, dorm rooms, and professors in tweed sport jackets teaching in lecture halls filled with students.

Perhaps some definitions are in order before proceeding further. Online courses are defined as those courses with at least 80% of the course content delivered online. Face-to-face courses also referred to as traditional courses or web facilitated or enhanced courses, are those courses with less than 29% of the course content delivered online. While blended courses, also referred to as hybrid courses, are differentiated from online and face-to-face courses as having anywhere from 30% to 80% of the course content delivered online (Allen, & Seaman, 2011).

METHOD

This was a qualitative study using a case study method. Case study is an appropriate method because it attempts to examine one area of concern (what is the impact of distance education) through one case (the United States) or bounded system (Creswell, 2007). The United States was selected because the researchers are more familiar with the US educational system.

Research Design

This study was a single instrumental case study designed to emphasize a detailed contextual analysis of the impact of distance education on the United States educational system (Creswell, 2007). This study was also designed to take the reader into the setting of the early years of distance education with a clarity not provided in a more reportorial account (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

Data Collection and Analysis

In order to gain a clear understanding of the context of the impact of distance education, the goal of the research was to focus on details that might not otherwise be detected or considered. The forms of data collection are often so interconnected in qualitative research that researchers compare the relationship of the techniques to a tree with branches extending from its trunk. In a sense the researcher climbs into the tree to gain a better perspective of the lived experiences (LeCompte, Millroy, & Preissle, 1992).

The information for this study was derived from: articles, books, and online sources. "Case studies rely on historical and document analysis . . . for data collection (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p.267). This study was limited to the written material available. These were examined in the research.

Data analysis included a holistic analysis of the entire case study to identify themes that emerged during the collection process. Naturalistic generalizations were developed from the emerging themes as a result of analyzing the data. These generalizations are implications or suggestions for higher education to apply to a population of cases (Creswell, 2007).

FINDINGS

Evolution of Distance Education. Distance education, as noted, is not new (Wood, 2013) and has a long history in the United States (Saba, 2011). The evolution of distance learning has assumed a variety of formats and escalating prominences. Originally, it took the form of correspondence courses (United States Government Accountability Office, 2011). Isaac Pittman's shorthand course, for example, dates back to 1840 (Criscito, 1999). Later the Society to Encourage Studies at Home was founded in 1873 by Anna Eliot Ticknor, daughter of a Harvard professor and noted scholar. Elizabeth Cary Agassiz, co-founder and first president of Radcliffe College, referred to the society as the "silent university" (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006, p. 573).

Ticknor's society provided a distance education option for women ultimately enrolling more than seven thousand women (Caruth & Caruth, 2012). Moreover, in excess of 100 million Americans have taken courses at a distance since 1890. The curricula for most correspondence schools were designed to assist the ordinary man or woman gain access to educational opportunities for developing occupational and agricultural skills.

This form of learning provided a democratizing effect on learning which did not correspond with the elitists' belief that education was for the privileged. The main purpose for distance education was to help the disadvantaged (Saba, 2011).

Universities, such as Columbia, began offerring radio courses in the 1920s-1930s and later courses over television during the 1960s (Criscito, 1999). During this time the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CBP) were established for children living in the inner city who were deprived of learning opportunities. One of the most well known programs that reached millions of pre-school children was Sesame Street. Again, distance education was available to help the disadvantaged (Saba, 2011). Interestingly, some students who learned at a distance included some well-known names such as Franklin D. Roosevelt, Walter P. Chrysler, Walter Cronkite, Berry Goldwater, and Charles Schutz (Criscito), creator of the comic strip *Peanuts*.

The University of New York later developed the first exclusively distance degree program in the United States in 1970. Ewald B. Nyquiste, a former New York State Education Commissioner, suggested that the University's Board of Regents sponsor the Regents External Degree Program which has awarded over 56,000 degrees. It is now known as Regent's College and was chartered as an independent member institution with the University of the State of New York in 1998. Currently, technology-based distance education has become an increasingly major part of American higher education.

A number of states have developed countless ground-breaking options for distance learning. One example is Western Governors University (WGU), which was formed by several governors of the western states in the United States. WGU is a "virtual university" without a campus and has a significant dependence on technology. It brings the resource organizations together to provide degrees and certificates to students globally (Criscito, 1999).

Fortunately, the history of distance education provides an opportunity for those accountable for online education to move forward taking advantage of the lessons learned from correspondence education. Some of those lessons include the following: institutions must be adaptable, institutions must have a vision, institutions must be dedicated to service, institutions must have expertise in handling the political issues, institutions must aggressively pursue un-served students; institutions must be committed to instructional quality; and institutions must be sensitive to potential disagreements between face-to-face and online faculty (Caruth & Caruth, 2012; Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006).

Currently, the many changes in online education are illustrated by the following:

➢ prominent institutions offering online education,
➢ proliferation of education over the internet,
➢ growth of scholarly writing *via* the internet, and
➢ rise in marketing online education.

To summarize, online education is a significant and growing part of higher education (Caruth & Caruth, 2012; Graham & Jones, 2011; Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006; Schulte, 2010). Impact of Distance Education on Higher Education. Administrators and faculty in colleges and universities in the United States have been forced to handle numerous changes caused by technology and the impact of distance education.

According to Adrianna Kezar (2005), adequate campus decision-making systems have not been in place to manage these increasingly complex changes. Furthermore, higher education has been accused of being too slow to make needed changes (Caruth & Caruth, n.d.b.).

Accomplishing effective change requires a balance between change and academic tradition (Keenan & Marchel, 2007). Knowing that change is imminent creates concern (Lane, 2007). For example, professors have devoted huge amounts of time, effort, and thought into their course loads. They have cultivated deeply entrenched principles and stances over years of research and scrutiny. They are dedicated to their individual fields of study. They view their "work more a 'calling' than a job" (Zell, 2003, p. 74). Traditionally professors have been given autonomy over their professional courses as a result of their high levels of knowledge. Professors have experienced a loss of control over the curriculum as a result of change prompted by online education. For example in today's environment , designers create the course, technologists develop the course technology, marketers advertise the course, evaluators assess the course, and professors communicate with students taking the course (Caruth & Caruth, n.d.b.; Lattuca & Stark, 2009).

Jody Oomen-Early and Lynda Murphy (2009) suggested that research be conducted to explore faculty burnout rates according to face-to-face, hybrid, and traditional courses. The researchers predicted that time, course load, and technical support will continue to be perceived as necessary for faculty contentment and ability to function. In addition, the infrastructure of the university is lagging behind technology although for many universities it is the means driving university enrollments. Administrators may not look beyond the dollar signs or growing enrollments. These same administrators who might never teach online evaluate faculty job performance, promote faculty, assign faculty compensation rates, and grant or deny tenure for faculty. As a result, administrators have a large impact on faculty job satisfaction even though they do not know what it takes to design and deliver effective online classes. If perceived needs of faculty go ignored, according to the researches, the after-effects are likely to impact all higher education.

Online education, a recent form of distance education, has become a definite example of change in higher education. Another example of this change, online learning, has experienced dramatic growth in recent years. Online enrollment numbers in degree-granting institutions in the United States has exceeded the growth for total enrollments in higher education (Allen, & Seaman, 2011; United States Government

Accountability Office, 2011). Online education enrollment numbers experienced a 21% growth rate while total enrollments experienced less than 2% growth overall. Furthermore, more than 5.6 million students took at least one online course in the fall semester of 2009. This is an increase of almost one million students from the previous year. In addition, close to 30% of students in higher education take at least one course online per semester (Allen, & Seaman, 2011).

In spite of the growth of online education a stigma remains. Any form of distance education has presented a number of unanswered quality and integrity concerns. While some faculty have embraced distance education for reaching people and emerging technologies that can enhance the learning experience, others have contended that learning at a distance is substandard and detrimental to student development.

In fact, many instructors claimed that distance education provides lower quality student learning requiring significantly more faculty time and headaches with the technologies employed to deliver distance education (Caruth & Caruth, 2012; Graham & Jones, 2011; Schulte, 2010).

However, research suggested that there have been some relatively small improvements in the perception of the quality of online education as compared to face-to-face education. For example, 57% of academic leaders rated the learning outcomes in online education as equal to, or better than, face-to-face learning outcomes in 2003. That has increased to 66%, a small but notable increase. In addition, better than three-quarters of academic leaders in public universities claimed that online education is equal to or superior to face-to-face instruction. This is compared to 55.4% in private nonprofit universities and 67.0% in for-profit universities (Allen, & Seaman, 2011).

Research suggested that a number of chief academic officers stated that online education is critical to their long-term strategy. This finding took an upward turn in 2010 after remaining steady for a number of years before. In fact, 63% of these officials stated that online learning was a critical part of their university's long-term strategy. This represents a minor increase from 59% in 2009. For-profit universities increased from 51% in 2009 to 61% in 2010, this increase was greatest among all institutional types. Moreover, for-profit universities were likely to have included online education in their strategic planning (Allen, & Seaman, 2011).

The United States Congress has made a number changes to the Higher Education Act of 1965 during the past two decades. Some of these changes have affected schools' offering and accrediting agencies review of distance education to prevent fraud and abuse at colleges and universities delivering distance education. For example, in 1992 Congress stipulated that institutions were not eligible to participate in federal student aid programs if more than 50% of their courses or students were receiving education through distance education options (United States Government Accountability Office, 2011).Change is ubiquitous (Boyce, 2003). Consequently, higher education is expected to deal with challenges of change and prepare students to handle change effectively. Education is about change and transformation. Moreover, this transformation has a direct impact on society. As individuals are transformed by the educational process, individuals consequently change society. Higher education must teach and encourage constant change (Hughes & Conner, 1989; see also Devos, 2005) and distance education is one example of change in higher education (Caruth & Caruth, n.d.b.).

The continued growth in online education cannot go on indefinitely. It will have to reach a plateau at some point. The early growth came from new institutions taking advantage of the demand for online education and existing universities began offering classes online. How long will this growth continue? Research suggested that there is no convincing evidence that the online education enrollment numbers will stabilize any time soon.A majority of universities continue to maintain that there is increasing competition for online students. Public universities claimed that there is more pressure from the for-profit universities than from the private, nonprofit universities. Also, year-to-year enrollment changes for fully online programs by discipline show most are growing with a sizable portion experiencing steady enrollment numbers. Almost all recent growth in online enrollment numbers has come from the growth of existing courses rather than from universities beginning to offer online education (Allen, & Seaman, 2011).

Public higher education in the United States, once considered immune to the effects of the market (Wood, 2013), has been facing a financial crisis during the past decade. States have cut spending in education to fund other areas, such as health care, transportation, retirement, etc. (Bowen, Chingos, Lack, & Nygren, 2013; Meyer, 2010).

Moreover, few states anticipate some degree of increase in revenue plan to increase funding in higher education. It is predicted that if financial conditions do not improve, colleges and universities will be expected to develop their own funding sources and establish more effective budgets if they want to continue to operate (Meyer, 2010).

One such college, Dana College, officially closed its doors on the last day of June, 2010. During the 70s one could look out the window of Old Main (a very old building) and see the scenic Missouri Valley.

The location of the campus was charming with beautiful buildings and a picturesque setting. Antiquarian Danish lights lit-up the campus each night. Enrollments varied from under 500 to over 900 and most of the faculty knew one another. Many came from large Lutheran families of which most attended Dana College (Snell, 2012).

Nearly 125 years earlier, Danish pioneers established Dana College to preserve the Danish heritage and the Lutheran faith was highlighted. The College would be a perfect setting for a Hollywood movie of a small liberal arts college. A religious monument sat on top of a sloping hill and the buildings filled in the backdrop (Snell, 2012). Money was very tight. Furthermore, there was obvious mismanagement and other dysfunctions at Dana College.

As a result of the recession during the 21st century and the changing market demanding new skills, the school could no longer flourish. Salaries and benefits were cut, faculty positions were eliminated, and still the perfect balance was never reached. In an effort to keep the doors open, a private corporation was invited to purchase the College.

The corporation claimed it would purchase the College for the accreditation and keep the school management and the appearance of the campus the same. It planned to use its money to create an on-line university. While the faculty was relieved, they were also worried that they had a year at most. After that, professors were concerned that the college would be downsized and they would be replaced by adjunct faculty (Snell, 2012).Dana College ultimately closed its doors when the Higher Learning Commission halted the functioning of the liberal arts schooling for online education. Fortunately, a nearby Lutheran college was able to absorb many of the remaining students for the fall of 2010. Dana College, now an empty campus, could be a warning for online education transitioning from the 20th century to the 21st century (Snell, 2012).According to Katrina Meyer (2010), effectively designed online learning can produce some revenue in addition to enhance student learning. However, this will require an investment from either the state or the institution. The initial thought that there was money to be made in online learning has been largely proven incorrect. Colleges and universities offering online courses can expect the revenues to cover only the expenses of programs and resources for designing online courses, which as proven to be time-consuming for faculty. Despite the gloomy outlook, there is hope that online learning can produce greater access to higher education. In order for this to occur, institutions of higher education will need to be committed and prepared to invest resources to realize the potential benefits that online education can provide.

Bowen, Matthew Chingos, Kelly Lack, and Thomas Nygren (2013) cautioned against too much hype about the potential of online education. To date there is no proof that online education delivers improved education in all cases. Online education has potential. According to the researchers, it is conceivable that these systems will become increasingly sophisticated and user-friendly in the future. In order for this to occur it is necessary for the development of an up-to-date and customizable platform. This platform would need to be widely available and efficiently maintained. As courses are developed they will need to be tested in a variety of settings in large universities. Ultimately, interactive systems that are well-designed have the potential for the desired educational outcomes while freeing up state resources that could be utilized elsewhere.

Academic leaders in higher education maintained that the impact of the economy has increased. There has been a greater demand for both face-to-face and online courses. Moreover, the increase in demand for online education has been greater than the demand for face-to-face education. For example, almost one-half of the universities claimed that the economic downturn has increased the demand for face-to-face education while three-quarters of the universities stated that the economic downturn has increased the demand for online education. The economic impact on budgets has been mixed. Forty-seven percent have experienced a budget decrease while 27% have experienced an increase (Allen, & Seaman, 2011).

The future of distance education, according to Farhad Saba (2011), will be impacted by empirical research. Studies need to be conducted by colleges and universities on learning outcomes and the effectiveness of learning. Additionally, studies will need to be completed on government actions and associated costs. Unfortunately, the current trend is toward an unsustainable future. Colleges and Universities have decided to increase the cost for an education rather than be responsive to the costs associated with education.
Conclusion

What has been the impact of distance education on higher education in the United States? The theme of change continued to emerge throughout data collection and analysis. There have been changes in course format, the role of the faculty, purpose of higher education, the institutions, United Stated higher education overall, and prediction changes for the future of higher education.

Here are some examples of change illustrated according to the six categories previously listed: course format changed from correspondence courses, to radio courses, to television courses, to online courses; faculty roles changed from control over the curriculum to limited control, causes of burn-out, and resources and working conditions; purpose of education changed from being for the advantage to being for the disadvantaged and technological dependency; institutions changed with the proliferation of education over the Internet, prominent institutions offering online education, development of distance degree programs, rise in marketing online education, technological changes, and academic tradition; higher education change included enrollment numbers, quality and integrity concerns, improvements in perceptions of distance education, strategy, and the Higher Education Act of 1965; and predicted changes for the future of higher education include commitment and preparation to invest resources, continued growth in online education will not continue without abatement, technological changes, studies conducted on learning outcomes effectiveness, and studies on government actions and associated costs on institutions.

What has been the impact of distance education on higher education in the Unites States? The impact has been to bring about many changes. It can be anticipated that in the future change will continue to occur.

Consequently, higher education has to be prepared to teach about change and teach students how to handle change.

Implications. The implications for higher education in the United States as a result of distance education are many. For example, there are likely to be continued changes in course format, role of the faculty, purpose of higher education, institutions themselves, United Stated higher education system overall, and predictions for the future of higher education. In addition, higher education must be a teacher of change. Because change is inevitable higher education is expected to be an instrument of change, preparing its student for what is to come. At its core, education is change and rebirth. Moreover, this change and rebirth directly impacts civilization. As students are changed and reborn they in turn transform society. Higher education must be an exemplar of change. Higher education must embrace and encourage continuous change.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that additional studies be conducted on the impact of distance education on the United States educational system to verify the results of this study. It is also recommended that additional studies be conducted in other countries to determine if the results of those studies are similar to the results of this study.

BIODATA and CONTACT ADDRESESS of the AUTHORS

Gail D. CARUTH, MS, plans to complete her doctoral studies in Educational Leadership at Texas A&M University-Commerce in May, 2013. She is a former human resource manager, currently an organizational consultant specializing in training and development, and a Senior Professional in Human Resources. Caruth is a certified mediator and arbitrator. She has authored or coauthored 3 books and over 60 articles that have appeared in a number of academic and professional journals.

Gail D. CARUTH (Corresponding Author)
Department of Educational Leadership
Texas A&M University-Commerce
Commerce, Texas USA
Residence Address 1876 Oak Bend Drive, Rockwall, Texas 75087
Phone: 972-771-2371
Email: gaildianna@flash.net

Donald L. CARUTH, Ph.D., is an Independent Management Consultant and has taught both online and face-to-face classes in higher education for over 40 years at seven different universities. He is a Senior Professional in Human Resources. He has authored or coauthored 20 books and 121 articles that have appeared in numerous academic and professional journals. A former runner, Caruth has run the Boston and Honolulu Marathons.

Donald L. CARUTH, Ph.D.
Independent Management Consultant
Residence Address 1876 Oak Bend Drive, Rockwall, Texas 75087
Phone: 972-771-2371
Email: dcaruth@flash.net

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