

Probing Question: Is a brick-and-mortar education passe?

July 1 2010, By Jesse Hicks



Once upon a time, college was as much a romantic ideal -- a rite of passage essential to the American Dream -- as an actual place. The vision included verdant lawns, students chatting between classes and campus buildings swathed in creeping ivy.

Recently, though, a more pragmatic view has come to dominate. As [education](#) costs rise along with demand, many have asked whether the campus experience is worth the expense. Information technology makes it possible to learn from virtually anywhere, and dozens of schools (including Stanford, Duke, MIT, Harvard and Penn State) have begun to offer lectures, classes and even degrees online.

Does that mean the brick-and-mortar universities are becoming passe? Not necessarily, said Gary E. Miller, former Executive Director of Penn

State's World Campus. Time spent attending classes on a campus is still very valuable, he noted, but "we're at a real turning point in online education."

In 1998, Miller helped establish Penn State's World Campus, with courses in Fundamentals of Engineering, Noise Control Engineering, Chemical Dependency Counseling, and Turfgrass Management. Today, World Campus offers over 70 degree and certificate programs through distance and online education.

Miller explained that much of that growth has come thanks to information technology, which makes it easy and convenient to connect students around the world. But even before the computer age, some universities, including Penn State, had committed to earlier forms of distance learning. For example, in 1892, the University launched a correspondence study program, using the postal service to provide rural farmers with agricultural classes. In the 1920s, Penn State began live radio classes; in the 1950s, it did the same with television. These new technologies allowed the university to keep up with a rapidly growing student population.

That population also has been increased by changing technologies, Miller said. Online study is popular among those already in the work force, who have full-time commitments to jobs and families. The opportunity to take courses online means "non-traditional students" can improve their skills and earn new credentials.

"In part, online education fulfills a need to re-educate the current workforce and update their skills and knowledge," he said.

The same factors that attract adult learners -- flexibility, convenience and specialization -- are what typical 18 to 21-year-old students have come to expect.

"Younger students have themselves adopted this technology, so they prefer it," said Miller. "Increasingly change is driven by students, who live their lives that way."

Students who spend their free time texting and social networking demand the same degree of technological sophistication from their educational experience.

However, Miller argued that there are other reasons for institutions to embrace online distance education, beyond simply catering to student desires. Last year, U.S. President Barack Obama committed to increasing the number of college graduates in America from 39 percent to 60 percent of the population by 2020. Careers in the information age, Miller said, demand an educated workforce, and ensuring the existence such a workforce means making higher education accessible to everyone -- a challenge surmountable only by taking the classroom to them. As educators, he said, "this is something we need to do, rather than something we want to do."

Even so, Miller thinks college campuses are unlikely to go completely virtual any time soon. The college experience now often includes many elements: study abroad, internships and online education. Like all institutions, universities grow and change, and Miller sees that process continuing.

"In the future, most high-school students will graduate and go to a college: part of the undergraduate experience will be on a campus," he said, "but around that will be lots of other kinds of experiences, including digital and virtual ones."

In addition, he said, there still will be plenty of verdant lawns, stately buildings and creeping ivy as well.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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