

Competitiveness and Distance Education

Michael Simonson

- Distance learners are better students.
- Distance learners learn more.
- Distance education is cost effective.
- Distance education is more effective.

This list could go on. These four statements are often said about the field of distance education, and are even sometimes believed, and that is



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unfortunate. It is very clear that these four ideas, and others similar to them, are not supported by sufficient evidence, in the opinion of most researchers who study distance education carefully. Certainly, in some instances better students take online courses, and in a few situations distance education students learn more. It may even be possible to show a cost benefit for instruction delivered at a distance for specific courses or programs, and effectiveness is so difficult to define that almost anything is effective to some one or some group. No, we should not try to build the reputation of distance teaching and learning on weakly supported claims which to the critic sound more like slogans than statements of fact.

With that stated, the distance education field is very attractive to many students, including better ones. Students do learn and learn well in properly designed courses delivered at a distance. Cost effectiveness is a goal often reached, and effectiveness is a goal of every distance educator. However, supporters of the field should probably not make broadly sweeping generalizations that do not tell the whole story.

Recently, the Alliance for Higher Education Competitiveness issued a report that took a potentially more

important position of advocacy for distance education—competitiveness. Their report, titled “Achieving Success in Internet-Supported Learning in Higher Education,” was released in February 2005. It was summarized in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* by Dan Carnevale in the issue of February 4, 2005, on page A31.

While this report did not specifically talk about institutional competitiveness, the fact that the Alliance for Higher Education Competitiveness would issue a report such as this one is interesting. The idea of institutional competitiveness is not often discussed when advocates of the field try to explain the exponential growth of distance education. Competitiveness is the process of trying to obtain what others want, which in the case of higher education is students, reputation, prestige, and even market share.

Has distance education now reached the point where it produces in educational organizations a competitive advantage? Well now, this is an area we should explore.

There is an oft-repeated and difficult-to-substantiate research statement that, for any group of students, about three quarters prefer face-to-face instruction if given free choice, but three quarters of

the same group demand to be permitted to learn at any time and in any place, since they do not have free choice. The organization that offers instruction—quality instruction—at a distance may possess a competitive advantage over other institutions. Competitiveness and competitive advantage works in business; why not education? This

idea sounds promising; now someone needs to support research about this idea—perhaps the Alliance for Higher Education Competitiveness.

And finally, obtain a copy of the Alliance's report at http://www.a-hec.org/e-learning_study.html. It is interesting reading.