Chapter 1.4

The Virtual University:
Distance Learning Spaces for Adult Learners

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ABSTRACT

By offering self-designed, guided independent study, for-profit virtual universities began as alternatives to traditional graduate education that emphasized full-time study and ignored the life demands of adult students. However, through the process of gaining accreditation, recognition by the academy, and acceptance in the marketplace, virtual universities now more closely resemble traditional institutions. Their challenge to traditional academic practices predominately rests with the use of electronic tools for learning and the access virtual universities provide thousands of part-time learners pursuing doctoral degrees.

INTRODUCTION

New delivery systems are challenging the supremacy of the physical classroom. Virtual (online) institutions of higher education are disputing the primacy of land-based universities as the only legitimate form of education for adults. Online and mobile learning tools are increasing access to opportunities for postsecondary adult education. However, little has been published about the ways in which adult learning is taking place in the virtual universities (VUs). These institutions have emerged in the past decade as providers of proprietary higher education to thousands of adults who otherwise may not have opportunities to engage in postsecondary study. How virtual universities came about, what they are doing to help adult learners achieve better lives, and what their future holds are the themes of this chapter.

BACKGROUND

As the educational marketplace becomes predominately adult-dominated, and as higher education institutions compete for adult enrollments, understanding how virtual universities are changing the landscape of higher education will be a significant issue in adult education. A number of trends are converging. For example, students learning online will outnumber those in seats for the majority of their education (Allen & Seaman, 2007). Learning is globally available at any time and in any place. Students entering the university have grown up with technology and expect to interact and learn through electronically mediated environments. For example, students are able to access information online while sitting in class. This necessitates additional skills to evaluate sources of information critically.

University faculty will need to consider the question of how they deal with the changing nature of the classroom, access to information, and how private VUs can provide opportunities for learning on a global basis, especially at the graduate level to otherwise disenfranchised learners (Cassano, 2008). Additionally, private VUs are challenging the notion of the traditional campus and the interactions that take place on a land-based campus. In essence, the virtual university suggests that learning opportunities should come to the adult learner rather than adult learners having to come to the campus. Considering the classroom as the space in which learning occurs, we can reconceptualize learning spaces to include the virtual as well as the face to face. This will influence how formal education is provided and, in turn, how adults will learn in the networked age.

Attempts at forecasting the future of learning have relied on applying current technologies to learning and have manipulated the settings for learning. For example, Levin (2002) forecasted the idea of tele-task forces for collaborative learning, neighborhood learning centers, and tele-apprenticeships. The models were rather conservative and did not fundamentally alter the manner in which content was provided or the roles of the instructor and learner. Virtual universities are on the technological edge regarding adult learning. They are altering how graduate education is obtained and are redefining the interactions between faculty member and adult learner.

Distance learning institutions held forth the promise of providing high-quality adult education any place, any time, and at any pace. This chapter describes the manner in which VUs are delivering on that promise. This chapter is informed by public sources of information as well as our experience teaching in various private VUs. The authors and the voices reflected in this chapter have lived the lives of online instructors. They have been involved with graduate online distance education as it evolved from the idea of distance learning as independent study to the notion of education delivered through the virtual campus. This chapter addresses the following questions in the context of independent, for-profit virtual institutions:

- What were the visions guiding the development of adult-focused online universities?
- What characteristics do VUs share that help adult learners achieve better lives?
- What trends are emerging for VUs in relation to traditional universities?

The emergence of the for-profit, virtual university primarily serving adult learners continues the evolution of offering opportunities for those learners who, because of geographic location, work and family commitments, or prior academic experience, could not attend or not be accepted at many of the established land-based universities. Although Hanna (2007) characterizes these universities as motivated by profit, these institutions have provided greater opportunity for adult learners by responding to their needs for baccalaureate to graduate education. In addition, VUs have adopted online and collaborative tech-

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