Thank you, Don, for that warm introduction...and good afternoon to all of you...my esteemed colleagues. As always, I relish the opportunity to explore the many ways we may reach across cultures and beyond borders to fulfill the promise of higher education.

And today, I have been asked to talk about how distance universities might help their face-to-face counterparts meet the challenges of what has become an exceptionally fluid...and certainly competitive...global higher education market.

Nothing sparks a heated debate among educators quite like the merits of distance learning.

Some see it as a money-making venture that sacrifices the purpose of knowledge for the limited utility of profit. Some contend that only the most motivated and disciplined students will actually succeed at it. Still others say it is eroding the very foundation of the academic enterprise itself.

And even among true believers, the term distance learning evokes nearly as many definitions as there are possible applications. Moreover, the demands of a knowledge-rich, technology-enhanced learning environment require colleges and universities to make significant and ongoing capital investments....in addition to the traditional research, faculty, and facility expenses associated with delivering higher education. All of which becomes increasingly difficult to justify in these tough economic times.

Regardless, however, of where we come out in the debate, the bottom line remains the same. In today's knowledge economy...where lifelong learning is both the engine of opportunity and the passport to global participation...technology is transforming the higher education landscape as we know it. By making it possible for learners of all ages and abilities...ethnicities and economic circumstances...to access world-class
academic programs and services...at different times...in different places...and for different reasons.

That said, technology has become a powerful catalyst for change...with experienced distance universities...such as my own University of Maryland University College...gradually emerging as the principal agents for this change.

But that doesn't mean the wholesale destruction of face-to-face learning. It means sharing distance learning practices that can actually enrich the learning experience...in ways that better meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

In fact, our students are looking for programs, services, and learning environments that few, if any, of us in this room even contemplated as we embarked upon our own academic careers. This is particularly true when it comes to educating the so-called digital natives...or students born after 1982.

Having spent their entire lives consuming everything that digital technology has to offer, today’s tech-savvy college student spends several hours each day living and learning in virtual communities...where they regularly connect with others...in literally every corner of the globe. Additionally, they use the Web as more than merely an information receiver....but rather as an ever-expanding gateway to collaboration and commentary.

Consequently, a significant number of our incoming students not only expect --- but, in fact, demand --- a learning environment that is simultaneously engaging, participatory, sensory-rich, and experiential...and far prefer to learn by doing than by hearing or reading about it. And unlike previous generations of distance technology...with their focus on course delivery and learning objects...the current generation emphasizes connections and context.

As such, they support learning as a process, rather than an outcome…and promote self-efficacy, rather than factual recall. They also provide us with tremendous flexibility when it comes to integrating formal with informal learning. And so when used effectively, these cutting-edge technologies make it possible for us to re-engineer many of our more conventional teaching practices.

Take the ubiquitous lecture hall, for example.

Now while this technique is certainly economical, it is hardly effective or empowering for the student...who becomes a passive vessel for information transfer. And even when the instructor is a charismatic speaker or extremely adept at using
visual aids, it’s difficult at best to keep a room full of minds from wandering for an hour or so.

To overcome these deficiencies, distance educators are incorporating podcast technology...with audio, video, and graphic elements...to upload lecture content into a format that students can access on demand...whenever and wherever they choose.

Some are even supporting lecture materials with highly interactive and multi-sensory video gaming environments. These virtual scenarios not only exploit the tremendous learning potential of interactive technology and fulfill the student’s need for profound digital engagement...they also build upon previous knowledge and accommodate for individual learning preferences.

At the same time, learners may access and exchange relevant information, while also improving specific skills and developing individual abilities....in a way that is easily transferable beyond the learning environment and into the real world.

Interestingly enough, this strategy is quickly taking hold in the United States....among even the most traditional institutions. Dartmouth College, for example, has developed one such virtual environment to train community emergency response teams...while Harvard University recently inaugurated River City...a virtual simulation designed to help public health professionals identify the root source of a highly infectious disease, along with a scenario for containing it.

Remote access technology offers yet another extraordinary way to learn by doing. My own university's network systems and security laboratory is a perfect example.

In looking for something more sophisticated than the traditional animation or simulation lab to support its information assurance program, UMUC settled on a remote access environment....a quantum leap, educationally speaking.

In fact, this new technology...which operates without broadband connection ...affords our students a unique opportunity to truly experiment from a distance, using actual hands-on, real-time applications...and state-of-the-art hardware and software systems from such industry icons as Cisco, Oracle, Microsoft, and Computer Associates. Needless to say, this lab represents what we Americans call the ultimate “win-win.” UMUC students gain real-world experience with cutting-edge technologies and applications, while the workforce benefits from hiring graduates who bring this experience with them.
Colleges and universities...with or without well-developed virtual campuses...are also adopting social networking technologies to enhance the learning experience.

Even the most basic social networking tool offers an exceptionally flexible and cost-effective communications platform...potentially linking thousands of learners from around the world within an environment that allows for both asynchronous and real-time connection. And in doing so, engaging them in active learning...while also promoting important critical thinking skills.

For example, blogging enables students to share and evaluate information and ideas, while also learning to read and write more effectively. From the instructor’s perspective, it provides an ongoing record of work from which to measure student progress. What’s more, students who are more or less “invisible” in the face to face classroom actually flourish in the blogosphere...as they become increasingly more proficient as communicators and collaborators.

Given these advantages, professors are using blogs for a wide range of learning tasks....from creating digital journals and personal portfolios...to coordinating group projects and maintaining discussion boards.

Moreover, this one-to-many technology makes it possible for us to build easily expandable, online communities of practice...connecting students, faculty members, and working professionals from various institutions and organizations....to create new knowledge, share information, and engage in cooperative problem-solving.

In fact, communities such as these are quickly becoming virtual global greenhouses for new ideas and inventive solutions...while also encouraging a sense of joint enterprise and professional identity across a myriad of cultural and linguistic traditions...geopolitical and socioeconomic realities.

Although the digital native generation is inspiring distance educators everywhere to push the technology envelope…we must, in fact, credit their adult counterparts --- or the so-called digital immigrants --- for fueling the distance learning revolution.

In fact, given the growing necessity for lifelong learning, adult students over 25, are becoming increasingly commonplace on university campuses worldwide. And because their school day begins after the work day ends, they need all the help they can get in the form of flexible academic options that transcend the sometimes overwhelming barriers of time and place.

Now while these adult learners may not be quite as high-tech as their children are, many have become knowledgeable digital consumers....who depend on the Web for
everything from email to e-shopping. So even when they choose the face-to-face
learning environment, they still demand the convenience of online customer
service...from class registration, tuition payment, and financial aid...to academic
advisory and career counseling.

Even more significant, adult students have far less time to spend enjoying the campus
life that has always been an important part of any memorable higher education
experience. That said, distance universities...such as my own...are using state-of-the-art
technologies to create a virtual campus of sorts, linking students electronically
with mentors and tutors...online clubs and honor societies...experts and future
colleagues in their fields of study.

At UMUC, we have also automated our Information and Library Services...an
important enhancement for students who live in remote locations...where good
libraries and books stores are few and far between. Yet as isolated as they may be,
these learners are only a mouse click away from a wealth of online information
resources...with hardcopy materials available by mail, whenever and wherever
needed.

This digital library system maintains a vast webliography that includes more than 100
databases...many of which furnish full-text versions of articles from among some
74,000 professional journals. Highly trained reference librarians are also on-hand 24
hours a day, seven days a week, to assist students by e-mail; online chat rooms; or
telephone. And so that students know how to effectively use both the library and the
technology, UMUC provides a mandatory course on library skills and information
literacy.

These same digital technologies can be used to provide busy faculty
members...balancing the demands of research and the responsibilities of
teaching...with professional development opportunities at times and in places that are
both convenient and accessible.

UMUC's award-winning Center for Teaching and Learning...or CTL...offers an
interactive e-learning environment, with an abundance of faculty resources in a
variety of formats...from written articles to self-paced tutorials and podcasts.

We have also uploaded a variety of professional development offerings, including the
experiential five-week preparation course that all new faculty members must
complete before actually teaching with us. And to further sharpen their skills along
the way, UMUC instructors may earn teaching credentials through a series of
distance training workshops in six areas of concentration...each of which is critical to successful teaching and learning in any environment.

What's more, the CTL uses one-to-many social networking technologies to facilitate cost-effective peer mentoring. As such, UMUC connects new and emerging faculty members...working in even the most remote areas of the world...with their more experienced peers...to share proven teaching strategies; explore diverse teaching philosophies; and develop new teaching methodologies.

Technology offers unlimited possibilities for scholarly exchange, as well...as online academic journals and wikis greatly reduce the time once devoted to peer review, author revision, layout, and production. These digital publications also allow for lengthier contributions...expanded indexing and cross-referencing...unrestricted color images...and extensive data mashups.

Thanks to open source article management software, UMUC produces a unique bimonthly online periodical. This faculty-generated e-magazine serves as an one-stop resource for articles, tutorials, learning objects, useful tips, live webinars, and links to outside resources...all tailored to support faculty development.

Of course, given the current global economic situation and its impact on student enrollment ...it isn't necessarily a good time to “go it alone” on any new distance learning venture. So a number of institutions...have now joined forces to recycle course content....unbundle and share student support services within common domains...promote the use of open source software...design highly scalable delivery systems...and develop mutually beneficial partnerships and demonstration projects.

One such collaborative effort in the United States is the Online Consortium of Independent Colleges and Universities... launched several years ago by Regis University. This consortium was created to help independent, non-profit colleges and universities fulfill their online learning aspirations, by minimizing their development costs. And in doing so, remain competitive with the growing number of resource-rich, for-profit distance institutions.

As I said earlier, distance learning is more than just a passing fad. It's a permanent...albeit rapidly evolving... dimension of today’s higher education market. Still, a shift in academic practice of any magnitude demands transformational leadership of the highest order. Something that every one of us in this room understands...because we are all change agents in the global education movement.
That said, we must continue to champion our cause for academic quality and innovative access...by reaching beyond our individual learning communities to collectively research, evaluate, and exchange promising technologies and practices with other like-minded, public and private institutions and organizations...both in and out of our respective countries. And in doing so, build a far more inclusive global education ecology.

One that empowers us to identify critical interdependencies; integrate core learning technologies; and sustain commonly held academic values and standards.

It is an extraordinary undertaking….but one that promises an equally extraordinary return on investment.

Thank you.

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