Good morning and thank you for that warm welcome. I am indeed honored to be here today with such a distinguished group of scholars... in one of China's Four Great Ancient Capitals.

I am also delighted to join my colleague and good friend, Mr. Yan...who continues to play a vital role in organizing the China-U.S. Forum on Distance Education. This forum facilitates a unique partnership between our two countries...through which to promote our collective vision for distance learning of the highest academic quality.

Whereas our respective national objectives for higher education are certainly similar, our systems for delivering it are significantly different. Last year, the United States enrolled some 18.4 million students in nearly forty-three hundred degree-granting institutions...from two year community colleges...to four-year liberal arts schools...to public and private universities of all sizes.

And although my country maintains a rigorous regional accreditation process to ensure the overall quality of postsecondary education, it does not have a national higher education system or curriculum. Instead, each of the fifty states has its own system of publicly funded colleges and universities...along with an assortment of private institutions that function autonomously.

Yet as diverse as the American higher education system is, it is fairly homogenous in terms of its focus. With the exception of community colleges and open universities, the vast majority of postsecondary institutions still cater primarily to "college-aged" students...18 to 24...who live on or near the campus.

And while a growing number are beginning to offer a few carefully selected online courses and programs, most of them are still wedded to the face-to-face learning environment.
That focus, however, is slowly shifting...as students of all ages, abilities, and lifestyles increasingly demand greater flexibility...in their search for accessible and affordable lifelong learning options. Moreover, as gas prices and unemployment rates continue to rise, so do online enrollments.

In fact...with Internet penetration approaching 75 percent in the United States...more than four million college students there will take at least one online course this year. And this number is increasing exponentially...at a rate of more than 12 percent per year.

Ironically, however, tough economic times have also made it more difficult for American colleges and universities to invest in online expansion. Moreover, government support for these projects is relatively stagnant, especially in the current financial climate. So the demand for quality distance learning will soon exceed the supply.

On the other hand, universities such as my own University of Maryland University College...or UMUC...offer promising practices for using technology to enhance the learning experience, while gradually building both the support and the infrastructure for full-scale online campus development.

UMUC is by no means a conventional university, having opened its doors in 1947 as a truly visionary experiment in adult education...founded in the belief that advanced learning should be available to anyone, anywhere, at anytime. Yet today, as the largest public university in the United States, it is one of academia’s greatest success stories...serving more than 90,000 students in 28 countries around the world. And as an open university, UMUC has always been at the forefront of distance education...bringing first-rate academic opportunities to the people, at times and in locations that are convenient and accessible.

Needless to say, the promise of online learning presented an irresistible challenge, along with yet another extraordinary tool for extending our academic reach even further.

Now...15 years after uploading its first online courses...e-learning has become vital to UMUC's success as a global university. In fact, having opened with little more than 100 enrollments in only a handful of courses...UMUC's virtual campus is now one of the largest and fastest growing in the world. With some 189,000 enrollments in close to 700 distinct courses...in more than 100 undergraduate and graduate programs offered fully online.
At UMUC, we view distance learning as something more than simply the process of choosing delivery platforms, converting coursework, and generating materials. For us, it means harnessing the power of technology to create rich learning experiences...dynamic learning environments...and vibrant learning communities.

That effort begins with what we like to call culture full virtual classrooms...which readily accommodate for everything from age or ability...language or cultural tradition...lifestyle or learning preference. So for international students, we can replace standard icons and menus with locally familiar words and symbols...or include locally-relevant case studies, textbooks, and data.

For adult learners, we are moving away from the concept of teacher-directed education to promote the theory of student-centered learning....in an effort to help these students build on prior knowledge and experience.

And for younger students...who view technology as a way of life...we are exploring ways to incorporate personal learning environments in conjunction with our more conventional learning management system.

UMUC is also using technology to engage students in active learning...a vast improvement over such passive settings as the traditional face-to-face lecture hall. Although universally accepted as an appropriate academic delivery system, lecture halls provide few, if any, meaningful opportunities for student participation or individual clarification.

And even when the instructor is a charismatic speaker...or extremely adept at using visual aids...it is difficult to keep a room full of minds from wandering.

To overcome these deficiencies, UMUC course designers are incorporating podcast technology...with audio, video, and graphic elements...to upload lecture content into a format that students can access on demand...at different times and in different locations. We are also experimenting with video gaming technology...used successfully for years by the U.S. military to train incoming recruits.

In essence, this popular digital pastime greatly enhances the teaching process, by providing students with a hands-on, multi-sensory learning activity...which is at the same time constructive and collaborative; immersive and interpretive; analytical and applicable.

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

Distance education must also promote authentic learning...by providing ample opportunities for students to amplify, clarify, and effectively apply what they are learning within the context of real-world situations. So rather than simply learning about physics...they experience what it actually means to be a physicist.

Remote access technology offers an extraordinary way to learn by doing...and one that UMUC has put to exemplary use in creating its network systems and security lab.

In looking for something more sophisticated than animation or simulation to support UMUC's newly created information assurance program, its director, Dr. Jim Chen and his team settled on remote access. Having only a limited development budget, Dr. Chen convinced such industry icons as Cisco Systems, Oracle, and Microsoft, to contribute free -- or at least deeply discounted -- hardware and software to the project.

He also worked with government experts and business leaders, UMUC colleagues and advanced level students, to design and construct the laboratory in line with the program's learning objectives.

And today, this truly innovative lab...which operates without broadband connection...affords students a unique opportunity to experiment from a distance...using actual hands-on, real-time applications and state-of-the-art hardware and software systems.

To be sure, it creates what we Americans call the ultimate win-win. UMUC students acquire real-world experience with cutting-edge knowledge technologies and applications, while the workforce benefits from hiring graduates who bring this experience with them.

UMUC is also beginning to embed interactive social networking technologies. Even the most basic of these tools offers an exceptionally flexible and cost-effective communications platform...potentially linking thousands of students to engage in both asynchronous and real-time learning that promotes important critical thinking and problem-solving 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. 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 UMUC to build easily expandable, online communities of practice...connecting students, faculty members, and professionals from various institutions and organizations to create and share new knowledge...engage in cooperative problem-solving...and promote a sense of collective enterprise.

While most universities do an admirable job of serving their students during the day, nearly half of all American college students are busy, working adults, for whom the school day begins once the sun sets. What’s more, because these students are balancing the responsibilities of life with the demands of lifelong learning, they need a great deal of help along the way.

So with that expectation in mind, UMUC has invested heavily in a comprehensive student support system, ensuring that every service normally furnished on campus can be accessed online, as well -- from class registration, tuition payment, and financial aid, to job fairs and career counseling.

And inasmuch as feeling connected to a university community has always been an important part of any memorable learning experience, UMUC’s Center for Student Success creates 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.

We are especially proud of our Information and Library Services division, given the number of students UMUC enrolls 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 an abundance of online information resources...with hardcopy materials that can be delivered by mail whenever and wherever needed.

This digital library system maintains a vast webliography of online library resources, including 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 available 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.

Of course, when all is said and done, successful learning begins with good
teaching. And state-of-the-art technology has made it possible for UMUC to
recruit an exceptional faculty. UMUC hires its online instructors from among the
growing number of international scholar-practitioners...who as renowned
academics and recognized experts in their fields...have taught and worked all over
the world.

But having knowledge and experience is one thing...teaching effectively is quite
another...especially from a distance, to students with diverse learning styles,
computer skills, and academic backgrounds. So to reinforce the quality of their
instruction...while also measuring its effectiveness...UMUC is using its virtual
campus to provide faculty members with professional development and peer
mentoring that is both continuous and self-paced.
Even more important, it enables distance instructors to experience online education
first-hand...an important first step in understanding what it actually means to be a
distance learner.

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.

Before teaching online, UMUC faculty members must first complete an intensive
and experiential five-week preparation course, conducted year-round and entirely
online. They may also earn teaching credentials through a series of structured
distance training workshops in six subject categories...each of which is critical to
successful teaching and learning in any environment.

In addition, the CTL provides a unique Faculty Media Lab, which brings faculty
members, course designers, and distance education coordinators together online to
create innovative e-learning enhancements. Moreover, this lab publishes “best
practice” case studies, for distance educators at other academic institutions to use
in their own instructional and resource development efforts.
As in most universities, peer mentoring is an important part of UMUC's faculty development process. But once again, one-to-many technologies link new and emerging faculty members...working in even the most remote areas of the world...with experienced peers...to share proven strategies; explore diverse philosophies; and develop new methodologies.

In nurturing the future of distance education, we must take advantage of opportunities such as this one to build true pipelines for innovation and investment...with other like-minded, public and private institutions and organizations...both in and out of our respective countries. Because by reaching beyond our own university walls we may create a far more inclusive distance education ecology.

One that fully supports this new culture of learning, while exploiting the fluid boundaries between knowledge producers and knowledge consumers. And one that empowers us to identify critical interdependencies; integrate core learning technologies; and sustain commonly held academic values and principles.

It is an extraordinary undertaking….but one that promises an equally remarkable return on investment. Especially in a world where the only constant is change and the race for knowledge, more critical than ever.

Thank you.

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