

The Western Center for Distance Education and Accessibility Research



OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY

DISTANCE AND
CONTINUING
EDUCATION



Need for the Research Center

The use of electronically delivered Distance Education (DE) in Oregon, in the West, and nationally has increased dramatically in the last decade. The next decade will continue to see increasingly expanded use of electronically delivered DE, especially using the World Wide Web.

While the need and opportunities for DE continue to grow, there are several issues that are emerging among the institutions taking the lead in delivery of Distance Education in Oregon and the nation.

■ Issues in Delivery of Distance Education

First, there are only a handful of institutions in the U.S. supporting this rapidly developing field of practice with quality research on the subject of Distance Education. Two such Centers are the American Center for the Study of Distance Education (ACSDE) of Pennsylvania State University and the Center for Distance Learning Research (CDLR) of Texas A&M University. There are no Centers for Distance Education Research located in Oregon or in the Western region of the United States.

Second, there is currently no integrated vision or strategy to provide linkages for research across DE offering institutions in Oregon, the Western region, or the nation. Networking, cooperation, and alliances are essential to avoid program duplication, to be fiscally responsible, and to efficiently provide quality distance educational opportunities to the citizens of Oregon, especially individuals located in rural areas.

Third, there is a need to better understand the processes related to the design, development, delivery, management, and evaluation of online (i.e., World Wide Web) DE products and services. Little is known about the impact of these new environments, created for, and by, online systems, on teaching and learning. Yet, hundreds of millions of dollars are being spent to support these efforts. It is essential that educators better understand these new online educational environments in order for institutions, from Kindergarten through Graduate School, to continue to provide our citizens with the highest quality education in the world.

Fourth, there is a need to better understand and promote appropriate assistive and universally designed technologies to ensure that "universal access" is provided to individuals with disabilities who choose to advance their education through distance education. Specially designed technologies for students



with disabilities are essential to ensure that all citizens are productive and enjoy a higher quality of life in school, at work and in their personal life. Unfortunately, access to these technologies and the training in their use is very difficult to obtain, and employers and educational institutions are unaware and uninformed as to the extent and type of access technologies that exist and the impact these technologies can have on their students and employees with disabilities.

■ Implementation Process

One approach proposed by Porter presents a new view of institutions as a cluster, consisting of interconnected institutions to ensure that all of these institutions succeed in the global environment (Porter, 1998). Clusters encompass an array of institutions and other important entities with specialized capabilities and complementary goals. In order for Oregon to ensure that the highest quality education will be delivered through distance technologies, Oregon's K-20 institutions need to be interconnected through a new DE research-based cluster.

This proposal is dedicated to creating this interconnection, or cluster, for distance education in Oregon. One outcome of this proposal is the identification and support of interconnected institutions around DE and accessibility topics.

The Oregon ONE Project is working to provide these interconnections and designate lead institutions for the study and practice of distance education. However, one fundamental piece

of the Oregon cluster does not yet exist. This critical component is a Center for Distance Education Research. Oregon State University, Oregon's Land, Sea, and Space Grant Institution will provide the leadership for this Research Center.

Oregon State University has an historic and unique role in Oregon. As the land-grant university, its heritage is represented through statewide collaboration and educational outreach. OSU emphasizes the importance of extending educational opportunities into every community in Oregon. For over 133 years, OSU has provided learning opportunities for Oregonians and created and applied knowledge that contributed to the prosperity of the State and its quality of life.

■ **Leading-Edge Model**

We will implement interconnections, a cluster approach in Oregon, which is much more than a single Research Center. It is a 21st-Century approach, a leading-edge model for engaging an entire Oregon K-20 community in top-quality, relevant distance education.

- The Western Center will be based at OSU, but will have the responsibility for creating an interconnected process for DE research between K-20 institutions in Oregon, the Western Region, and the nation.
- OSU will link Oregon into a shared learning and research community, taking advantage of expert DE instruction and new educational approaches, the most advanced organizational models, and current information technologies.
- This new Center will be electronically interconnected with outstanding K-20 partner institutions throughout all of Oregon, and other collaborators in the Western Region, the nation, and the world.
- The goal of the Western Center for Distance Education Research will be to "fast-forward" the quality and validity of the distance education teaching and learning experience for K-20 institutions, teachers, and learners by 5 to 10 years.
- The Center will test models for delivering business and information outreach technologies to those disconnected from the new economy.

■ **Objectives of the Center**

Recognizing the mission of OSU to stimulate a lasting attitude of inquiry, openness and social responsibility, the primary objectives of the Center are to:

- Provide fundamental and high quality research in distance education for the DE community in Oregon, the region, and nation.
- Act as a national resource Center for students, faculty, and staff with disabilities to promote and support their learning and work activities.
- Explore and evaluate pilot outreach programs for delivering business and information technologies to those disenfranchised by the digital divide and new economic trends.

- Create interconnections between K-20 institutions by establishing research clusters, networks, cooperation, and common project alliances.
- Provide information and products addressing the processes of distance education with a particular emphasis on the online teaching and learning environment.
- Establish an applied adaptive technology resource facility to promote access to information technology at school, work, and home for individuals with disabilities.

In the short term (i.e., the project duration), the Center will focus on the following specific goals:

- Conduct applied research and strengthen the understanding of "online" pedagogies, teaching methodologies, and evaluation systems.
- Conduct multifaceted research and development on universal access to multimedia content delivered via the World Wide Web for individuals with disabilities.
- Initiate and evaluate pilot outreach programs for delivering business and information technologies.
- Examine the impact of new accrediting guidelines and regulations, agency policies and practices, and study recommendations for web-based instruction on the DE activities of K-20 institutions.
- Investigate models of virtual/online campuses (i.e., portal systems) and their impact on K-20 education.
- Develop and test new online teaching models and strategies.
- Develop instruments and processes for online course and instructor evaluation.
- Contribute to the ONE resource center with e-Journals, readings, research monographs, new media, and other materials related to online teaching and learning.
- Conduct applied research, evaluation, and dissemination of information on leading edge distance educational technologies for individuals with disabilities.
- Create best practice web development strategies and tools to assist educators in their efforts to deliver fully accessible web-based instruction.

■ **Partnering with OUS**

OSU is working together with the Oregon University System to establish the Center.

- The Center will be housed at Oregon State University and will fall under the responsibility of the OSU Dean of Distance and Continuing Education.
- The Center will serve as a bridge for research activities among institutions in OUS, the Oregon community colleges, public K-12 institutions, and will respond to and support their distance education research needs.

- The Center will also build alliances and network with other institutions in the West and throughout the nation to share, aggregate, and disseminate data relevant to the processes of teaching, learning, and accessibility in DE environments.

■ Significance of the Research Center

In the short term, all seven (7) universities in the Oregon University System, all seventeen (17) community colleges in Oregon, and K-12 public institutions throughout the state will benefit from the research activities conducted and fostered by the Center.

- The Center will also work closely with related organizations, such as Oregon Community Colleges Distance Education Consortium (OCCDEC), Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET), the National Council on Disability, and the Braille Authority of North America, in identifying issues to be addressed, coordinating efforts, and disseminating results to DE users and policy makers.
- The Western Center for Distance Education and Accessibility Research will significantly strengthen the U.S. research infrastructure by offering the only DE research center in the West, and by building a connected Distance Education community that involves K-20 institutions throughout Oregon, the Western region, and the nation.
- The Center will improve teaching and student achievement by examining, developing, and offering effective DE teaching models and strategies, and by disseminating new research-based information and services to all segments of the learning community, including learners with disabilities.

- The Center will also improve available resource efficiency by building interconnections through research alliances among K-20 institutions.

■ Proposed Budget

Establishing the Western Center for Distance Education and Accessibility Research will require faculty, staff, equipment, and overhead for the first two years of operation. Once operational, continued funding will be obtained from a variety of other sources including: Oregon State University, Oregon University System, the State of Oregon, the Oregon Department of Education, private foundations, federal grant programs, and fees for service. Oregon State University will provide physical space for the Center and will fund part of the costs for administrative support and overhead.

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