Advances in Technology in Continuing Education: Who Should Foot the Bill?

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Every continuing education unit must be at the forefront of the technology boom in order to remain attractive to students and best prepare them for the work force. Unfortunately, there is a significant cost associated with technological advancement sparking the debate over who should foot the bill for innovations. This article applies the Higher Education Benefits Policy (IHEP, 1998) as well as other relevant literature to help resolve the debate. The benefits of technological advancement to higher education extend well beyond the individual receiving a degree; thus students should not solely receive the additional cost burden. Institutions of higher education should work to fill the needs of the public and private sectors. All involved should share the costs of technological advancement.

Issues related to who should foot the bill for continuing and higher education certainly exist. With the numerous budget cuts that have been made in recent years, conversations over financial issues pertaining to technological improvements have definitely increased. This is especially true when the discussion turns to short-lived technologies. Who will benefit from investing in professional development that is provided for instructors who use technologies likely to be outdated by the time their students enter the workforce? Three sectors will benefit from the continuous updating of technology in higher education: the individual, the institution, and the public. Thus, all three should share in the financial burden. A review of elected literature is offered in support of this argument followed by a conclusion that includes recommendations for future practice that would lead to an improved higher education system.

Literature Review

According to Matkin (2010), every continuing education unit must be at the forefront of the technology boom. Higher education units must recognize the need for acceptance of new instructional technologies in order to market their programs and make them available to potential audiences. Matkin notes, “Even the most traditional institutions are now either offering or considering offering online education” (p. 34). Jarmon, Traphagan, Mayrath, and Trivedi (2009)

contend that the augmented use of technology has resulted in more adults accessing continuing education seeking degrees in hopes of obtaining promotions or more appealing jobs outside of the field in which they currently work. It is thus incumbent on institutions of continuing or higher education to ensure the availability of the newest technologies, even with the full realization they may be short lived (Fong, 2009).

In its policy statement, IHEP (1998) identified the benefits both the private and public sectors can reap by utilizing up to date technologies. Individuals introduced to new technologies have a better chance of becoming employed and earning higher salaries. This can subsequently lead to an increase in the financial amount they are able to save as well as to associated professional rewards and social class mobility (McMahon 2009; Pasque, 2005). Higher earnings result in increased tax revenues. A better-trained workforce leads to greater productivity and increased goods consumption. The consequence of all of this is reduced consumer cost and an eventual decreased reliance on government financial support for the local community. Geographic areas that have higher average incomes also enjoy lower crime rates.

Human capital, "the knowledge, skills, and attributes acquired by investment in education and health throughout the lifecycle" (p. 41) is the bedrock element in an ownership society (McMahon, 2009). Pasque (2005) supports this claim indicating that while higher education certainly helps the individual, the main benefit is its service to the greater good of the population. She contends that "higher education needs to fulfill its responsibility to educate students for both the private and public good of society" (p. 14). Contrary to Labaree (1997) who stipulates that private advantage should not come at the expense of the public sector, Pasque (2005) and Fong (2009) maintain that the crucial function of political engagement is to connect the personal good with the public benefits; and never is the public benefit from individual education more important than during a recession (Fong, 2009).

Focusing on the use of technological advancements to increase availability and accessibility of higher education to the public, Gifford (2010) suggests that institutions invest in marketing tactics that use new technologies to reach more potential students. Hancock (2010) further notes that the widening methods of delivery to the student population will lead to students who are able to utilize more diverse forms of media and technology. She contends that increasing technological availability leads to improved learning experiences. Experiential and hands-on

learning result in students who are better equipped to make a smooth transition to the workplace (Knowles, Holton, Swanson, 2005).

In contrast with the opinions voiced thus far, technology in education can have drawbacks. Critics hold that certain technologies can quickly become a 'flavor of the week.' Some instructors use technology merely as a way of making their teaching easier rather than helping students effectively learn. For some students, technological advancements can also become a distraction to the actual learning goal. It is the institution's responsibility to ensure that instructors are adequately trained to use the technology in ways that enhance content learning as well as the environment (Rodriguez & Nash, 2004). Only then can it lead to the private and public benefits.

A final drawback often associated with advancements in technology is the potential for academic dishonesty by students. Karim, Zamzuri, and Nor (2009) indicated that the widespread use of the Internet makes it extremely convenient to use copy and paste functions as well as other unethical behaviors to complete assignments. In order to maintain integrity, institutions need to allocate financial resources to reliable methods of authentication so as to ensure that original work is being performed (McNabb, 2010). "Without the necessary oversight to ensure integrity and quality, the greater 'access' provided through distance education may result in a substandard reputation for the institutions and the students who complete on-line programs and courses" (McNabb, 2010, p. 50). Such costs on the part of the institutions are certainly passed down to the student, exacerbating the access problem higher education is currently facing. Shareholders should understand that if an institution is not using the most recent technologies to reach and teach the population, it is unlikely that it will be able to fill its classrooms (Witkowsky, 2008). Full class size leads to the greatest cost to output ratio. Thus, all shareholders in continuing and higher education programs should be willing to foot a portion of the bill for increased costs associated with technological advancements (Rodriguez & Nash, 2004).

Two additional questions that warrant discussion relevant to this topic are how to fund technological advancements as well as professional development for the instructors charged with teaching with new equipment. Institutions should not feel the need to purchase each new technological advancement that is released in order to offer the best education to their students. Institutions can work to develop partnerships with other local businesses in order to provide students with the opportunity to gain experience with specific forms of technology. For example,

if a medical school is in relatively close proximity to a hospital, a partnership can be developed. If each entity shares the financial responsibility for new technologies, both benefit. For example, if the hospital and medical school share the cost of a new MRI machine, students will gain experience with the new machine while the hospital accrues benefits from its availability.

Numerous such examples exist in various fields. Administrators must be willing to go out into the field and create partnerships. Yet, while the up-front costs of this scenario are decreased for all parties involved, one must consider the increased maintenance and equipment replacement that may occur in due to increased use.

Conclusion

It is clear that the state and public sector, the institution of higher education, as well as the individual all benefit from increasing the availability of new technologies in higher education. Thus, all three bodies should share the financial responsibility. Institutions of higher education must continue to seek ways to provide access to new technologies in order to serve the public and private sectors. At the same time, they must work to develop partnerships with area businesses in an effort to create savings that can be passed to the public, the institution, as well as to the individual. These practices can result in a reduction in the overall dollar amount all benefiting parties end up paying.

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