

ASSIMILATION, NOT SUBSTITUTION

Michael Simonson

Co-editor

A recent column in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* traces the growth of distance education in the last five years. “Enrollment in for-credit distance-education courses grew to 2.9 million in the 2000-1 academic year from 1.3 million in 1997-98” (August 8, 2003, p. A28). The article also notes that “fifty-six percent of two- and four-year institutions—or a total of 2,320—were offering distance-education courses in 2000-1, up from 44 percent three years earlier” (p. A28). In addition to other information, the column stated that:

public institutions offered distance-education courses more frequently than did private institutions. Ninety percent of public two-year institutions offered distance-education courses, compared with 16 percent of private two-year colleges. Eighty-nine percent of public four-year colleges offered the courses, compared with 40 percent of private four-year institutions. (p. A28)

Certainly, these data are not surprising to anyone intimately involved in distance education. An additional statement in the *The Chronicle* column highlights an idea that is interesting and important. John Bailey, Director of Educational Technology at the U.S. Department of Education said,

Distance education is not replacing traditional higher education institutions. It's allowing these traditional higher-education institutions to make their courses and faculty expertise available to a whole new set of students who otherwise would not be able to participate for what ever reason (p. A28)

There are those who say distance education will replace conventional education, and others who profess loudly that conventional education is superior to instruction delivered to distant learners. Along the continuum between the two extremes—total distance education and total conventional education—lies reality. Distance education is being, and will continue to be, assimilated into education, not only to replace but to complement, supplement, and support teaching and learning. In the future, education will be offered at a distance, in a classroom, and in various combinations of the two. The instructional design question of the day is how teachers will decide when to use the new collection of instructional technologies that fall under the heading of distance education. To us, the key is assimilation, not substitution.

Finally, we would like to thank guest editors Ryan Watkins of George Washington University and Ingrid Guerra of the University of

Michigan-Dearborn for their excellent work putting together this issue of the *Quarterly Review*.

REFERENCE

Kiernan, V. (2003, August 8). A survey documents growth in distance education in late 1990s. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, A28.