

High Performance Higher Education: The Federal Role

By David A. Longanecker

The federal government—specifically the U.S. Department of Education—might conceivably adopt any one of three different scenarios to help realize the promise of technology. But, to understand these scenarios, we must first understand the federal roles in higher education.

At the outset, we make a clear distinction between our national role and our federal role. We believe that the Department of Education has a responsibility with respect to each, but they are different. While we certainly believe that we are duty bound to provide national leadership, we obviously share this task with many others including local and state educational agencies and organizations like the NEA that have both a regional as well as national presence. So we perceive that we are partners, but not the senior partner, in establishing a national leadership agenda for higher education.

On the other hand, we believe that we have a primary responsibility to provide federal leadership in the area of postsecondary education. This is different from providing national leadership. Basically, we provide this federal leadership through the legislation that we propose, and through the way in which we write the regulations and administer the programs mandated to us by Congress.

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These two roles—national and federal—lead us to a focused vision, captured in the one-sentence mission statement of the U.S. Department of Education—to assure access to educational opportunity and to promote educational quality for American students.

Access and quality are equal, inextricably-linked goals. You cannot, we believe, have access without having quality in all education. To do less is a false promise. Conversely, you cannot have quality without having access. A program that is not accessible to all people in America is not a quality program.

The verbs in our one-sentence mission statement reflect our two roles. The 14th Amendment to the Constitution requires the federal government to assume responsibility for assuring access. We're as much to blame as anyone else if students lack access to postsecondary education opportunities.

In contrast, we *promote* quality; that's different from *providing* it. We don't do education. Delegating primary responsibility for the quality of education to the states relegates us to a less significant, though important, role in achieving this goal. You, ultimately, must provide quality education—we're here to help you do your job well.

Now, to the three different possible strategies the Department of Education might conceivably pursue in realizing the promise of technology:

First, if it ain't broke—especially if it's the best in the world—don't fix it. Many colleagues in higher education advocate "keeping a steady course." Under this scenario, we would base our management and regulation of student financial aid programs—our principal way of providing access—on traditional modes of instruction and educational delivery. We would, that is, use tried and true financial aid models to serve new clientele. Our evaluation and monitoring efforts would therefore continue to focus on inputs and process factors, not on outcomes.

The Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education would continue to support a small but important number of creative ideas for using educational technology. And we would not routinely

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consult other departments with interests in these technologies—the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Labor, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the National Science Foundation, for example.

This scenario wouldn't be the worst of all worlds, because we are making marginal progress in improving the "tried and true." But this scenario does not address the social challenges of technology. Technology would remain the province of the haves, not the have-nots—individuals and institutions. Our student financial aid programs, by design, would remain indifferent at best and even sometimes hostile to the technological needs of learners and learning institutions. And our education programs would remain unconnected, sometimes redundant, sometimes out of sync with the efforts of other federal government agencies, and other innovators.

That's what we would do under a status quo environment at the Education Department. Indeed, that's essentially what our predecessors did for 12 years. But neither Congress, as recent higher education legislation shows, nor many governors, nor many citizens would let us continue with the status quo. These constituencies are disenchanted with American higher education, seeing us—you and us—as anachronistic, irrelevant, unaccountable, and even a bit arrogant. If we don't lead a sea change, they likely will—probably with mandates.

So on to our second scenario: an activist, aggressive federal role in helping to formulate new teaching and delivery systems for American higher education. We've already created a special focus on new technologies within the Department of Education. Our Office of Technology will lead the development of an information infrastructure within the department, and will coordinate the department's efforts with the National Information Initiative. The office will also bring postsecondary institutions, libraries, and community centers into the planning of the initiative.

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successful new delivery mechanisms. Regulations would focus on high performance, driven by high standards—not process and inputs—akin, for postsecondary education, to what the Goals 2000 legislation just accomplished in elementary and secondary education.

Finally, we would bring the policy management activities within the Department of Education up-to-date in the use of technology. Our offices lack the broad range of technological sophistication and in far too many instances we're still a paper-driven organization. In fact, some of our offices are one or two generations behind most professors and most colleges and universities. Updating our internal use of technology will make it easier for us to think about changing the organizational structure in ways that will significantly enhance the workplace environment.

What would happen under this scenario? The haves and have-nots would have an equal opportunity. Economically disadvantaged students would learn—learn much more. We would educate all students more efficiently by combining the power of the new technologies with existing technologies that still work. Postsecondary education would restructure itself, reinvent the role of faculty members, and redefine the concept of campus.

This highly visible process of reassessing, restructuring, and reinventing would instill in the public a sense of confidence in higher education; a sense that we are modern; that we are willing to adapt and incorporate these new technologies into the academic environment; that we know what we are doing; that we care; and that we are willing to be held accountable for the outcome of our activity.

The third scenario is the “get out of the way,” “the best government is the least government,” or the “*Wall Street Journal*” model. “Don't worry about the infrastructure,” argue advocates of this model. “Market forces will take care of that, just as they did with cable television, Cellular One, and all those wonderful things that are part of our life today that weren't a few years ago.”

The Department of Education would deregulate and disinvest in its activities. Now, in theory, deregulation doesn't necessarily mean

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disinvestment. But it never works that way. Where Congress cares—as it does with education—it puts money. But it almost always puts in place perceived remedies because it wants to make certain that the problems are addressed in the manner it has in mind. And so in the converse, if Congress takes away its caring, it's likely to take the money away as well!

The development of educational technology would be left to the states, institutions, and to the private sector. What would result from this scenario? Our information infrastructure would develop around entertainment, business, and research. The instructional component of education would be appended to those applications. Education would be a second thought, not a principal actor.

Students in rich institutions, supported by rich parents, would benefit substantially from that approach. Students from poor families would not, because they lack the requisite resources. Quality control would be driven by the providers of the instructional service, and they would not be regulated—which means the prevailing market forces would control the school environment.

Though there would be some attempts by privately supported consumer groups to provide information and oversight, students generally would be ill-served.

So there are three scenarios. Which are we likely headed for? Our rhetoric reflects the second scenario. Government can exert a positive force, and we see ourselves as positive and principal partners in creating a new paradigm around technology. Our strategic planning effort for realizing the promise of technology—the first strategic planning in the Department of Education—has three ambitious goals:

To advance a vision for the use of technology that supports lifelong learning, systemic reform, and the expansion of resources, including the National Information Infrastructure.

To provide leadership and assistance across the nation and within the department for implementing effective uses of technology in education.

To encourage the development of applications that will achieve lifelong learning and systemic reform.

But reality can cloud the clearest vision.

We know that government funding at the state and federal level is already stretched to the limit. And while it may be possible to reallocate a small amount of existing public resources, success will undoubtedly require a substantial financial contribution from the private sector to accomplish this ambitious agenda.

Our partners—you and your institutions—will also have a role to play in achieving these objectives. However, it is evident that even at this level there exists a certain aura of discomfort between the parties that may hamper cooperation. This issue of unwarranted federal intrusion into the management of our educational institutions has generated a fair amount of suspicion and mistrust. To appreciate this sensitivity, you have only to observe the uneasiness that exists in the higher education community over the newly promulgated student financial aid regulations.

And there are other pressing domestic priorities, as well, that make this vision of enhanced use of technology in the schools and colleges difficult to achieve. We haven't done all we should to address existing access issues within higher education. Also, we can't overlook a number of additional attendant national and international issues that demand the attention of the President and Congress.

As a consequence of these conflicting forces, what you're likely to see is a hybrid of scenarios one and two. This is an activist federal government, and President Clinton is determined to pursue an education policy that is at once aggressive, substantial, and focused. Simply stated, the President wants to make certain that the outcome will be user-friendly and customer-oriented as we strive to assure access to educational opportunity and promote quality in education for all American students.

Effective use of technology will play a critical role in this endeavor. Join us, participate with us, be our partners, and let's make it happen.