The Advantages and Disadvantages of **Distance Learning**

What opportunities and difficulties await high ed institutes looking to extend their distance learning offerings? We asked our Iota Theta panelists to weigh in, and this is what they had to say.

PROS

▶ **Provides higher learning opportunities to areas that lack access to quality colleges and universities.**

"Allows us to reach out to underserved areas or 'educational deserts' to connect"

"University of the People…offers exciting opportunities to indigent people around the world, [like] refugees and immigrants, as a means of empowerment through scholarships."

▶ **Universities and colleges can showcase their forward-thinking tech acumen and infrastructure to potential students—something very appealing to a new generation of learners.**

"Prospective students can easily find information about courses and drill down into richer course content and communities"

Innovation and competition in the tech industry are driving down the cost of high ed devices, like laptops and VR/AR headsets. This makes distance learning more affordable for schools and students.

"With all-in-one VR headsets now available for the price of an expensive meal at a nice restaurant, suddenly the game has changed for the consideration of 1:1 learning."

"Technology, like video conferencing and VR collaborative worlds can bring learners together"

Thanks to economies of scale, distance learning is now considered more cost-efficient for institutions to implement.

"One cannot ignore the revenue benefit of distance learning. The infrastructure is not as costly and the per credit cost can be increased because of the convenience factor."

Enables high ed organizations to introduce their premier programs to a broader market, opening new enrollment opportunities, which increases admission numbers.

"Online education would definitely increase recruitment for the providers/institution."

Distance learning provides real-time information to faculty and students, rendering many college textbooks dated and outmoded.

"Unlike in most conventional classrooms, distance students benefit from 'just-in-time' learning in which information and training are delivered as soon as they become available thanks to technology-based, self-guided functionality."

CONS

Dull, unengaging online courses can dramatically lower test scores for students who prefer more hands-on, active learning.

"You can't take traditional curriculum into a virtual classroom and expect the same results."

Any online activity attracts security threats. Exposing a university's system and network to a wider population forces colleges to constantly invest and update their security protocols.

"We can think of early adopters in education along the lines of early adopters of technology hardware. When you think about early smart hardware (computers), they all have something in common: the early versions left a lot to be desired."

"Early adoption of [distance learning] is likely to be expensive and require continued upgrading and modification, as outages are noted. Depending on how much funding is incorporated into the initial idea, the cost to revise and update a program can be significant."

Remote learning environments, particularly asynchronous models, may inhibit peer-to-peer interaction and exacerbate engagement efforts. Modern technology can alleviate some of these growing pains, but universities must account for these concerns when creating their online curriculum and infrastructure.

"Potential lack of collaboration/community can foster learning silos."

"Online classes have little to zero sense of community."

Distance learning may prove difficult for certain types of required curriculum, namely: lab work, experiments, and applied-learning activities.

"There are clearly specific fields where distance learning is likely not feasible at present; particularly in the medical field, where hands-on training is critically important."

Some schools experience a 50-70% dropout rate for online course, mostly due to unreliable tech and students feeling isolated and frustrated with the distance learning process.

"One disadvantage is the lack of real-time discussion or answers to student questions unless real-time lectures are scheduled. Another disadvantage is the lack of peer support and social interaction."

"While online support and groups do form through social media and other technology, the lack of face to face human interaction and communication is a disadvantage."

Schools struggle to manage accountability measures that thwart answer-sharing and other cheating tactics.

"Typical undergraduates today rely on a "network of shared knowledge" that some might say borders on or is outright "cheating."

"Programs have little oversight and it becomes more about pushing people through to earn money than actually ensuring a quality education...it seems like a win-win until the graduate is in the workplace and knows nothing. This reflects badly on the university."