

Virtual University: Models and Messages/Lessons from Case Studies. Susan D'Antoni, Ed. UNESCO Editions, 2006

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Conceptually, the “virtual” university is barely a decade old. At first many rejected the concept of a *virtual* university or believed it to be flawed because its departure from the traditional concept of a university was so vast. Today, those involved in the delivery of distance education or connected to some aspect of it are familiar with or probably even involved in programs or partnerships with virtual universities.

D'Antoni's book, *The Virtual University: Models and messages/lessons from case studies* captures in its chapters and case studies the frenetic growth of 'elearning' in eight very different environments. Readers will have an opportunity to learn something about the early struggles and ongoing challenges of creating courses and programs delivered online through universities developed for that purpose. D'Antonio writes: “The new form of institution appears to be an important development in the efforts made over time to adopt technology and adapt it to the needs of the institution and of governments, staff, students and employers” (20).

The *Virtual University* has been produced strategically as two editions. The first edition “was created for the web, with the purpose of disseminating widely the information and intelligence collected” (21). The first edition was meant to stimulate discussion and reflection through both the web publication, and its accompanying web forums. This, the second edition, presents “a selection of cases from the first web edition” describing the development of 'elearning' over time in eight environments and locations in the world. The chapters of case study are buttressed by chapters of overview and prediction.

The value of the second edition, or the print edition, of *The Virtual University* lies in being able to view eight environments for online learning that have experienced significant change from the beginning idea through 2003 when the 'pulse' was checked a second time. The developments, progress, strategies and growth of the institutions and the programs offered can be seen from a longitudinal perspective. Having such a view is helpful to anyone who is at some stage of undertaking the transformation of his or her own program within a virtual university environment.

The case studies in the second edition focus on universities in Malaysia, Senegal, Argentina, Australia, Canada, Kenya, France, and

India. They chart their experience of building and maintaining online programs for credit and non-credit, at undergraduate and graduate levels over the past decade. These eight chapters explore the development and challenges of an organizational and logistical gauntlet that at times probably seemed more defeating than it did fruitful. Each institution persevered, however, and growth ensued. For some institutions, the path was altered but the result was still growth in their programs and acceptance of the model they developed.

Anyone who is or has recently been involved in partnership programs attempting to extend offerings of undergraduate or graduate courses into collaborative partnerships with other universities or merely into interdisciplinary partnerships will find valuable information in *The Virtual University*. Its worth can be drawn from the unique situations of each of the case studies. Universities in nations with low literacy and difficult or undependable government structures, to universities in wealthy nations with stable governments but no monetary support from their government, explain how they were able to offer courses to an increasing number of people who have been marginalized within the traditional bricks-and-mortar institution but who have thrived within a virtual university. Many of the case studies offer such concrete, step-by-step instructions to the building of their programs and the hierarchical structure that maintains them, that the text becomes useful as a do-it-yourself guide to those who have not yet embarked on a quest to form a 'borderless' program.

Although, as D'Antonio summarizes in her concluding chapter, there are significant differences among the institutional case studies within the text, there are also general issues that all found important. Those were: "institutional development and organization, technology, management, academic programmes and concerns, and national and international environment" (444). When you think about it, that list of issues summarizes the concerns of anyone involved in higher education today. Many educators and researchers can understand the benefit of combining their efforts across institutions to be able to offer to students the best possible courses and programs. The obstacles to this sensible desire seem always to be the institutional, departmental and infrastructural disputes and difficulties. The success, where there has been success, of borderless programs has been due to the dogged determination of those who will not be bowed by the challenges. Reading *The Virtual University*, and becoming involved in the online forum that is maintained by the program that supported the initial research, will help those who are committed to challenging the traditional in order to support those who will benefit from non-traditional approaches to learning.

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