

# This We Believe About Enabling and Enhancing Educational Experiences through E-learning

BY THE POLICIES COMMISSION FOR BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC EDUCATION

Few topics raise more debate among business educators than the role of e-learning as a crucial component of the educational process. With the involvement of business educators, e-learning may develop to its full potential as a means of involving students in knowledge construction. Business educators who are already technologically astute should find it easy to take leadership in tailoring e-learning options for business students at all levels of education. E-learning, any learning experience that is enabled or enhanced by the use of technology, comes in many forms. Business educators can use e-learning to engage students in active problem solving that connects them to other learners, experts, and repertoires of best practices and research to prepare them for a future as lifelong learners.

Three compelling trends are impacting the need for business educators to develop new ways to engage students in learning: changes in demographics, technological capabilities, and global economics and employment. The first major trend is demographic, namely, the composition of the labor force is changing. A significant proportion of the population, baby boomers, will continue to work past traditional retirement age. These experienced workers are recognizing the need to take responsibility for their own learning in order to grow their careers, extend their work lives, and engage in self-development. Another change is the increase in diversity of the workforce with regard to ethnicity, gender, and special needs. In addition, the increase of new entrants to the

country heightens the need for basic skills training, as well as access to a variety of resources for learning. Responding to these changes requires more flexible educational systems.

A second major trend is the accelerating capability of knowledge management technology to support the collection, storage, processing, retrieval, and sharing of information to facilitate enhanced business and learning opportunities at higher levels of sophistication. More readily available and emerging technologies have increased expectations of interactive capabilities through text, data, voice, and video—both for doing one's work and for learning. Because of these capabilities, most educational institutions and organizations are offering learning opportunities online. The ubiquity of technology has led to increased expectations by students that courses will be available with e-learning enhancements. Young learners, in particular, have experienced technology in a way that causes them to expect continued emersion of new technology to maximize the capabilities of technologies for learning.

The third major trend is global economic and employment changes. These changes lead to greater uncertainty as to which jobs will be available. Employees possessing technological skills will be able both to do their jobs and to continue to learn. In addition, they need to possess highly refined social skills for team-based work environments. Inevitably, all workers must be committed to lifelong learning to remain competitive. This commitment is

especially important for the increased numbers of contract, temporary, and entrepreneurial workers who will seek flexible and individualized opportunities to support their learning. Business educators must be responsive to the needs of this contingent workforce.

**We believe that** educational institutions must be as responsive as industry, in fact leaders with industry, in making the most of technology for learning. The traditional roles of business education—creating, preserving, transmitting, and evaluating business knowledge—are being challenged by private entrepreneurial efforts, including textbook companies, corporate universities, professional organizations, and licensure groups, who are using technology to respond to rapidly changing learning needs. Traditional educational institutions have the opportunity to collaborate with these efforts for mutual benefit, often using technology as a bridge.

**We believe that** the learning environment is critical for e-learning to be effective. The core component of this environment is identifying the course or curricular outcomes that can be met by including learning activities supported by technology. Also, an effective e-learning environment requires commitments from institutions, faculty, and learners. These combined elements are the building blocks—the solid foundation—of e-learning experiences. This environmental synergy is vital to business educators who must have the time and financial support from an institution, as well as the technological infrastructure, to

support the production and delivery of instruction. E-learning experiences must align with objectives, and learners must be able to use the technology and be motivated to engage in e-learning activities. **We believe that** this synergy will happen when the business educator

- takes the leadership role in promoting new applications of e-learning systems.
- recognizes the benefits and limitations of technology.
- demonstrates expertise in business content.
- expands teaching strategies to take advantage of technology designed to support learning.
- creates appropriate evaluation practices to verify that learning has occurred.

**We believe that** business educators can create student-centered, e-learning environments that involve more than just using technology to disseminate information. Learners must be engaged in active learning experiences including teamwork, discussions, projects, research, inquiry, discovery, and reflection. Effective business educators facilitate learning communities by posing thoughtful questions, monitoring growth, encouraging collaboration, and providing specific, timely feedback. All of these activities can be enhanced by appropriate use of technology.

**Therefore,** as the business educator makes decisions about enabling and enhancing educational experiences through e-learning, the primary criterion must be student learning. Implicit in this expectation is the assumption that appropriate technology will be selected to support teaching practices that link learning objectives to rigorous standards and high levels of achievement. Some evidence suggests that blending e-learning technology and business content with face-to-face contact is effective for many learners and educators. For e-learning to be effective, the institution must provide the technological environment and support, the faculty must design the curricular environment, and the student must be mindfully engaged.

Business educators can start by incorporating the fundamental elements

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The PCBEE annually develops statements and guidelines to serve as yardsticks against which legislative leaders, businesspeople, parents, and professional educators are able to assess the effectiveness of the components of business education and the total discipline. A book of all statements published to date is available for purchase. Address inquiries to Betty J. Brown, PCBEE Executive Director, Ball State University, ISOM Department, 2000 University Avenue, Muncie, IN 47306-0335; (765) 285-5227; fax: (765) 285-8024; e-mail: bbrown@bsu.edu. The policy statements for the last five years are available on NBEA's Web site at [www.nbea.org](http://www.nbea.org).

of e-learning—communication, collaboration, and access to resources. As faculty and students gain confidence and skill and as research evidence becomes available, the natural progression may include incorporating more capable technology to support learner-centered

activities. **Therefore, we believe that** business educators, given their breadth of expertise and their connections to business and industry, have a unique opportunity to provide exemplary models of e-learning environments.