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e-Harvard.400

by ELI M. NOAM and NADINE STROSSEN

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Illustration by Roland Sárkány

MAIN ARTICLE
[Harvard at 400](#)

HARVARD STARTED AS a small local seminary. Students and faculty got there by foot, boat, or horseback. Information arrived the same way. But in the nineteenth century, transportation and communications improved rapidly and Harvard became a university to the nation. With the arrival of the jet plane, it reached the world. How should the new, powerful means of electronic



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communication shape Harvard's scope?

They have already enabled new forms of online and distance education. For-profit and public universities and second-tier private universities have used these enthusiastically—though not always successfully—to expand their reach and serve nontraditional student pools. But should an elite university such as Harvard extend exclusive Ivy League education beyond campus?

Inevitably, it will, driven by competition with other institutions and economic pressures to spread high costs across a larger student base.

Doing so can also further Harvard's core mission of offering the best education to the best minds around the world. Expanding access to Harvard's courses via communications media would help erode barriers to the free flow of ideas and information, and democratize learning.

But e-Harvard must honor certain principles.

First, the value of a Harvard degree cannot be diluted. Admission standards for e-students must be at least as rigorous as for Cambridge-based students.

Second, any outreach must go both ways. As knowledge grows, it becomes impossible for the University to support specialists in all subjects. A course on, say, medieval Persian poetry might have to be imported online to the handful of interested students, and Harvard would similarly transmit some of its courses to Iran. The University's role becomes one of quality control and the creation of global consortium relationships with other leading educational institutions.

Third, any online education must involve more interaction, not less. Education is more than knowledge transfer. It is also a process of socialization and empowerment through mentoring, "peering," hands-on experience, and freewheeling exchanges that push intellectual boundaries. In this respect, online education now seems a lesser version of the real thing. But in time the tables will be turned; e-Harvard will need to include well-crafted 3-D lectures by star professors, "virtual worlds" and simulations for skills training, interactive Socratic programs for thinking on one's feet, and social networking for peer exchanges.

Fourth, online and campus-based education must be blended in a "click-and-brick" experience. Online students would have to spend time in Cambridge, even as campus-based students spend significant time elsewhere while still taking Harvard courses online.

Fifth, online activity must be justified on educational, not financial, grounds. A quality online curriculum actually costs more than the traditional blackboard-and-chalk method. Furthermore, any expansion to poor countries will have to be affordable there. Together with high selectivity, these factors will check the profitability of most programs.

Sixth, a Harvard education should not end at graduation. E-Harvard should add a "lifetime maintenance and upgrade contract" for knowledge and skills. This will lead to diminished distinctions among students, alumni, and instructors.

In the past, students came to Harvard. In the future, Harvard will come to the students, wherever they are.

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