

Internet poses new challenges, competition to higher education

11/17/00

ALFRED As communications technology has evolved, so has society's reliance on it, whether for something as simple as sending a greeting card or as involved as researching stocks and maintaining an investment portfolio. Add higher education to the long list of areas that, if not controlled, are highly influenced by the Internet. Dr. Gregory C. Farrington, president of Lehigh University, delivered the 2000 John F. McMahon Memorial Lecture, sponsored by the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University. In his lecture, titled "Darwin Goes to College: Educational Competition in the Dot Com World," Farrington spoke of the need for colleges and universities to embrace communications technology. "We've taken a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching, but there are many alternatives," Farrington said. "The Internet has suddenly opened us to new competition." He referred to courses and degree programs now offered over the Internet, many of which are less costly and less time-consuming than those offered in a traditional college setting. Moreover, Internet-based instruction eliminates constraints caused by distance, making such programs more accessible to more people. With technology such as real-time video and audio text, on-line instruction has become a sophisticated and viable option in higher education. "There are now plenty of MBA programs taught over the web," Farrington remarked. "Maple College in Wisconsin (a fictional institution) can deliver its fine arts program to Hong Kong or Alfred, and nothing can stop them." Farrington said colleges and universities can use the Internet to gain an advantage in the competitive world of higher education. He said the web can facilitate interaction between students and professors, offering options such as chat rooms for on-line discussion of courses, or multi-institutional research teams. "It makes research alliances possible. Researchers at Alfred University can be in contact with researchers throughout the world," Farrington said. "You find the best researchers and link them up (using the Internet). It's happening all over the world." Farrington lauded Alfred University as a "well noted and well known" institution. "The ceramics program, particularly in materials science, is quite famous," he said. "It is a great place to be, intellectually." Still, Farrington said, Alfred, like all traditional institutions of higher education, is in the midst of a period of change. Residential colleges and universities, he said, must concentrate on initiatives that will make them unique and attractive to students, despite the competition from on-line educational alternatives. "Are we going to be replaced by a web site? If what we do can be replaced by a web site, it will. We have to do things that can't be replaced," Farrington said. "We have to ask ourselves, 'What do we do for our students for those four years?' We'd better have an answer." Farrington said residential student life offers something the on-line programs can not. "It comes down to a simple word: Community," he said. "The web will force us to be what we've always claimed to be anyway. If we do this well emphasize the power of community and have the courage to change ourselves we'll be in business a long time." The McMahon Memorial Lecture is held to honor the late John F. McMahon, former dean of the College of Ceramics. "This occasion commemorates the life of a man who dedicated 68 years to the study and research of ceramics," said Dr. Charles M. Edmondson, University president. Farrington was selected the 12th president at Lehigh in May 1998. Prior to his appointment at Lehigh, he was dean of the School of Engineering and Applied Science at the University of Pennsylvania. He earned his bachelor's degree in chemistry in 1968 from Clarkson University, his master's degree in chemistry from Harvard University in 1970 and his Ph.D. in chemistry (specializing in electrochemistry) from Harvard in 1972. Farrington began his career as a chemist in 1972, joining the General Electric Company as a staff scientist. In 1979, he joined the Department of Materials Science at the University of Pennsylvania. "He is truly a materials scientist of great distinction," Dr. Ronald Gordon, dean of the School of Ceramic Engineering and Materials Science, commented, referring to Farrington's work in electrochemistry and its applications to the field of materials science. Prior to the lecture, Dr. James Shelby, John F. McMahon Professor of Ceramic Engineering, presented the McMahon Achievement Award to senior ceramic engineering student Edward Bongio. The annual award honors students for their performance on co-op assignment. Bongio did his co-op with Saint-Gobain Industrial Ceramics in Worcester, MA. He is the son of Vincent and Nadine Bongio of Syracuse.