Education in general and, more specifically, higher education, faces new challenges and is at a critical juncture in its evolution. Today we are experiencing what Ervin Laszlo (1989) called a “convergence” in his book, *The Inner Limits of Mankind*. We are at a time when a number of parallel forces are coming together and intensifying the chaos occurring in higher education. Several primary elements of this convergence are the rapid advancement of technology; the collapsing of barriers, both natural and man made, that has kept humanity separated; and the educational opportunities that are now available to anyone-anywhere-anytime.

With the advancement of technology, instructional delivery to a diverse student population is currently a reality. Consequently, it is often difficult for students enrolled in online classes to visualize or relate to fellow classmates representing cultural differences and/or alternate geographical locations. Is this a new challenge? I think it is. Some might say that the very structure and function of higher education are being threatened. I would prefer to think that we are experiencing the collapse of one approach to instruction and learning to adapt to an emerging one. This book is a collection of essays, case studies and research that reports on many elements of this evolution involving higher education in an increasingly diverse learning environment.

Technology, economic needs and ease of travel have made our world, for all intended purposes, one country. The major issues that prevent this changing world from embracing a new identity are humanity’s inability to communicate and socialize on an acceptable or genuine level. These issues have prompted the increase in the use of educational technologies, intensifying the cultural encounters that universities experience in a variety of applications. This has had the advantage of imposing on higher education the need and ethical responsibility to confront limitations in programmatic offerings both curricular and
extracurricular, particularly as they impact issues of diversity. Recently, accrediting agencies have recognized this challenge and required all institutions of higher learning to include dispositions in their conceptual framework that support goals involving diversity. Higher-education communities are concerned less with a person’s attitude than the behaviors that issue or evolve from that attitude.

As a consequence of today’s technology, universities have entered markets that would never have been considered a decade ago, often driven by an economic force that universities face today. I teach at a small university in western Kansas, with a dwindling population. Due to economic circumstances, this institution was forced to examine and potentially attract other markets and populations as candidates for offered academic programs. This examination mandated major commitment from the faculty and the institution to adjust in significant ways. As a result, we found ourselves playing an increasing role in regional economic development, in the delivery of life-long learning and in the development of “connectivity” to rural communities, while addressing issues of concern. In a manner of speaking, we have become more relevant to our regional needs while at the same time reaching out to international markets for economic enhancement. It is interesting to note, in fact, that the international connectivity has brought many fringe benefits to the regional community. The products of our institution are now more marketable, while simultaneously providing economic “connectivity” and resources to the small rural communities of western Kansas.

A decade ago, the president of our university set out a vision of “High Tech—High Touch” as a goal to drive future development. Technology has, in fact, facilitated interpersonal and inter-social exchanges and provided general access to information, which has the effect of blurring the distinction of nation, race or culture. Universities of the future will be required to develop many more and different kinds of links with surrounding society. Their success will be determined increasingly by their ability to deliver distant learning opportunities and their relevance to the local and regional communities in which they reside. And here lies a threat to the conventional way of doing things. Soon, my university, Fort Hays State University, will have more students enrolled in our courses from China (6,000) than from Kansas (5,000). This was driven, in the beginning, out of economic necessity, but has greatly changed the way we do business regionally and dramatically affected our existing programs, curriculum and faculty. Our universities today extend far beyond our regional and state markets, and offer courses and degree programs nationally and internationally; and, many on-campus courses have added a “virtual” element to their current course structures in addition to face-to-face environments.

My contact with students has changed dramatically with the use of e-mail and computer-based communication, such as computer conferencing programs. Technology has provided mechanisms for distance delivery of education that has improved the frequency and quality of communication with students and colleagues within my department and internationally.

Other challenges reported in this book are what we have learned about learning and its application to the explosion of technology. Globally, these new challenges we face should be viewed as an opportunity and not one that has threatened our very survival. The insights emerging from this experience are well documented in this collection of essays, case studies and research reports. Several chapters explore the issues around these challenges, and between these pages you will encounter several very able endeavors to offer solutions and suggestions to improve our understanding and effectiveness in delivery of post-secondary instruction to diverse populations. As a result, people of every background have been ex-
posed to the cultures and norms of others, which may be the most valuable element of the learning experience.

So, are these new challenges in higher education or are they perhaps an opportunity given the tools of technology available to us today?

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