

Assuring Quality in Distance Education
Jane Buck, Ph.D., President
American Association of University Professors

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I am delighted to be here and to participate in what promises to be a very important and stimulating discussion. Our General Secretary, Dr. Mary Burgan, regrets that she is unable to attend.

It is worth noting that this seminar is taking place in real time and at a physical location that required many of us to travel long distances at considerable expense of time and money in the face of possible terror attacks. The difference between online and classroom learning has been compared to the difference between reading someone else's love letters and being in the presence of the beloved. Many academicians view the virtual university as an inferior, if not fraudulent, substitute for the real thing—the traditional brick and mortar university. Others view those skeptical of the wholesale adoption of new technology as Luddites for whom word processing and letter-quality printing are functions best performed by cloistered monks using quill pens. Faculty concerned with the increasing corporatization of higher education view university presidents who rush into the virtual market as predatory venture capitalists. The disaggregation of faculty work and the distribution of the components to academic workers who might or might not have the same protection as faculty with regard to academic freedom and tenure is particularly worrisome to the American Association of University Professors (AAUP).

Many are pinning great hopes for educating masses of students on the Internet, and I certainly do not dispute the possibilities for its effective use in clearly defined areas. Unfortunately, little, if any, carefully designed experimental research has been done to assess the effectiveness of instruction on the Internet compared with other forms of instruction. Before we accept blindly the notion that electronically delivered courses will serve all students and all disciplines equally well, we require research focusing on a number of questions. Are there certain subjects or topics for which the Internet is peculiarly well adapted? Are there those for which it is peculiarly ill suited? Do certain types of students benefit more than others from Internet-based courses? How shall we measure successful learning?

My own experience with electronically delivered instruction, admittedly very subjective, did little to convince me that we are anywhere close to a panacea. When the department of classics of one of our most prestigious universities announced an experimental, online, not-for-credit seminar with no prerequisites and no fees, I enthusiastically registered. Enrollment, which was to be limited in order to facilitate online exchange, peaked at approximately 700. The anticipated convenience of attending lectures at one's leisure quickly became frustration when transmission was interrupted by some malevolent cyber bug. Students' answers to homework questions were, understandably, very similar, with the exception of those that went on for thousands of words, perhaps in the hope of revealing their authors' erudition. The absence of face-to-face contact and the requirement to respond very succinctly almost guaranteed that students would answer in very similar fashion. After reading the twelfth virtually identical response, boredom was my overarching reaction. Although the Internet

may prove to be useful for the delivery of raw information, my experience convinced me that, notwithstanding the commitment of enormous resources by a flagship institution, the medium, although promising, still leaves much to be desired as a vehicle for providing a nuanced and meaningful educational experience. Many of the data used to support claims for the efficacy of online learning are suspect from a statistician's viewpoint. The statement that no statistically significant difference was found between online and classroom instruction is emphatically not the same as the statement that the two methods are, in fact, equal. The statistical methodology most often used in studies of differences is designed to detect differences, not to establish that no difference exists. When a statistical difference is established through such means, the researcher is in a very strong position to state with a quantifiable level of confidence that the difference is real. A failure to find a difference, however, is a very weak position that can be explained in multiple ways and does not permit equally confident statements about the results. A failure to detect a difference can result from any of a number of possibilities: (1) There really is no difference between two groups; (2) a difference exists, but is too small to be detected with the number of participants in the experiment; or (3) the experiment was poorly executed.

The University of Phoenix and the Western Governors University (WGU) are often cited as examples of successful experiments in virtual education. It is interesting to note that, when the president of the University of Phoenix speaks, he cites as proof of the worth of his institution the fact that it features small classes, co-operative learning, well-informed faculty, practical applications, and face-to-face contact. The university offers degrees in only a few disciplines, and the online portion of the enterprise is new and relatively small. The Western Governors University, a virtual university with only an estimated 200 students, has spent millions of dollars to provide its programs. An associate degree from WGU costs between \$5000 and \$7000 compared with just over \$3000 for a comparable degree from a public institution in one of the western states in the United States. One informal measure of the quality of an institution of higher learning is the willingness of faculty and administration to send their own children or grandchildren to it. I am willing to wager that neither the president of the University of Phoenix nor any of the governors of the states involved in the creation of WGU would send their offspring to either institution.

In grappling with the issues generated by the growth of virtual institutions, the AAUP continues to revisit many of the questions we have dealt with over the decades. What is a university? What does it mean to be educated? Who will be educated? By whom? By what means? Who guarantees the quality of an institution's offerings? What is the proper role of the faculty? Of the administration? Of the governing board? Of state and federal governments? How are faculty involved in the governance of the institution? How do we guarantee academic freedom?

The function of education is not merely to provide information, but to produce well-informed citizens who will further the welfare of humanity as leaders in their respective fields. Scientific and technological innovation, no less than innovation in the humanities and social sciences, flourishes only in an atmosphere of intellectual freedom for both teacher and student, free from corporate and governmental interference. American colleges and universities attract students from around the globe because they are able to provide such an atmosphere.

The AAUP has dedicated its resources for almost a century to preserving and protecting academic excellence and integrity. The *1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*, developed in cooperation with the Association of American Colleges, has been accepted and endorsed by over 160 professional organizations. The *Statement* (revised in 1990 to eliminate gender-specific language) includes the following in its preamble:

Institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good and not to further the interest of either the individual teacher or the

institution as a whole. The common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition.

These principles are no less applicable to higher education today than they were 61 years ago. And they are equally applicable to all disciplines and to all modes of instruction, including electronic classrooms. The search for truth in every field of human endeavor is a process that requires the freedom to err, the freedom to criticize, and the freedom to receive constructive criticism in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

Recognizing that distance learning is neither new nor likely to disappear in the near future, I list below seven principles, adapted from the AAUP's 1999 *Statement on Distance Learning*, that will help to insure that students receive a high quality learning experience.

1. The purpose of using new technologies should be to advance teaching and scholarship. The development of appropriate policies is the responsibility of the academic community. Although the academy exists to serve the larger community, we believe that it is the academy rather than other agencies that possesses the requisite expertise to formulate appropriate policies in this arena.
2. As in all curricular matters, the faculty should have primary responsibility for the development of policies relating to distance education. The AAUP operates on the premise that the faculty, more than any other constituent of the college or university, is competent to make such judgments, recognizing, of course, that the institution's governing board has ultimate decision-making responsibility.
3. The precise terms and conditions of every appointment should be stated in writing and be in the hands of the faculty member and the institution before the faculty member delivers a distance-education course for academic credit. The terms and conditions should include, *inter alia*, information regarding course enrollment, compensation, required office hours, technical and clerical support, and ownership of course materials.
4. Faculty members engaged in distance education are entitled to academic freedom in accordance with the provisions of the 1940 *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*:

Academic freedom is essential to these purposes and applies to both teaching and research. Freedom in research is fundamental to the advancement of truth. Academic freedom in its teaching aspect is fundamental for the protection of the rights of the teacher in teaching and of the student to freedom in learning. It carries with it duties correlative with rights.

5. Faculty engaged in distance education have the same responsibility for choosing and presenting materials as they do in traditional classroom settings. This is both a responsibility and a right. Who chooses materials controls the course. Academic freedom is at stake.
6. The technical delivery of the course is the responsibility of the institution. Although individual faculty members are responsible for choosing and presenting material, it would be onerous and unreasonable to expect them to take on the burden of technical delivery.
7. The institution should establish policies and procedures to protect its educational objectives and the interests of those who create new material and those who adapt course material originally intended for a traditional classroom setting. The policies should include provisions for compensating faculty who create or adapt materials for online courses, as well as provisions for a faculty body to oversee the future use of recorded materials.

Faculty and administrators must vigorously and fiercely defend the university as a community of scholars. We must guarantee the autonomy of the faculty and protect the integrity of scholarship and teaching from corruption by corporate and political interests at the expense of a disinterested pursuit

of knowledge. We must, at the same time, be open to the appropriate integration of new technology and models of organization in our teaching and research.