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In this issue:

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Problems with Assessing On-line and Non-Traditional Programs for Accreditation

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Abstract

The rapid growth of the computer and information technology (IT) industry has resulted in an increasing need for specialists trained to work in these fields. Current US Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that employment in the fields of computer and information processing is increasing faster than the average. The nation's universities have long served as the primary source for future IT workers who will be responsible for the development of the new emerging technologies. However, changing demographics among the nation's work force are causing students to consider new methods of education. Today, computer, Internet, and broadcast technologies are used effectively to develop new kinds of distance and on-line learning programs. Unfortunately, problems abound with the recognition such programs engender among more traditional schools and universities, from students who populate these programs, and from honor societies, who are frequently asked to sanction such programs by establishing local chapters. While traditional colleges and universities are, for the most part, endorsed by various governing bodies that accredit mainstream institutions, such is not the case for many programs delivered on-line and from a distance.

Keywords: Online programs, accreditation, IT, computer science, honor societies.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is well documented that the growth of computers and information technology (IT) has resulted in an increasing need for highly trained specialists proficient in these areas. Current US Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates employment in the fields of computer and information processing is "expected to increase much faster than the average as organizations continue to adopt increasingly sophisticated technologies" (U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008). The Bureau's statistics further predict information technology careers that require computer science training will increase by at least 27 percent through the year 2014.

Despite these encouraging numbers published in 2007, computing sciences faculty are all aware of huge enrollment declines in recent years. Partial responsibility for the most recent declines lies with the changing demographics occurring among the nation's IT work force. Older, more mature students, who are currently employed in the industry, have discovered a continuing need for education/re-education. Information technology has proven itself to have a very short life

cycle making it imperative that IT workers regularly contend with new technologies and changing tools. This reality dictates that workers must continually strive to keep their skills and knowledge up to date or risk obsolescence. This situation, coupled with rising costs associated with education and the desire to balance education with work and a family life, has made it necessary for institutions to rethink delivery methods. In short, it has become increasingly important that education be available at a time, place, cost, and in a manner that accommodates an employees' work and personal life. This requires universities to schedule more frequent offerings on evenings and weekends and at locations other than the normal classroom setting and to offer online programs.

Questions have always been raised regarding any new approaches taken to the delivery of education. This has certainly been true with regard to education delivered predominately from a distance or from other on-line technologies. In particular, is education delivered using these means equivalent to that delivered by traditional programs from accredited institutions? Will graduate schools evaluate undergraduate degree holders from non-traditional programs in the same manner as graduates from traditional programs? Will universities readily fill faculty vacancies with those holding graduate degrees from non-traditional programs with the same confidence as those from traditional programs? These are very pressing issues that confront our society as we continue to migrate into new educational paradigms.

2. PROGRAM RECOGNITION

Questions pertaining to the recognition and concomitant quality of online programs continue to abound (Military Education, 2008). While the scope of this paper is to concentrate on questions regarding recognition of such programs and their graduates by honor societies, there are several overarching issues.

A. The Need for Standards

Accreditation can be defined as "the independent review of educational programs for the purpose of helping to establish that the learning offered is of a uniform and sound quality." (Philips, 2008) This is important, from a student standpoint, since credits earned at an accredited institution (and from an accredited program) will generally be fully transferable to other institutions. *This is not always the case for credits and degrees earned at non-accredited institutions / programs*. As such, accreditation is vitally important if one is to assert that learning occurred at a reputable institution. As a practical matter, accreditation is important to many academic institutions because some colleges and universities are hesitant to allow student matriculation to both the undergraduate and graduate programs unless students are able to provide some evidence of potential success. Indicators of success normally arise from test scores and good grades on prior work taken from accredited programs and institutions. Further, many institutions require that professional programs, such as the engineering disciplines, be accredited and that individuals taking the licensing examinations in those professions have graduated from accredited programs.

The desire for alternative methods of delivery that cater to the non-traditional student has unfortunately led to a lengthy list of fraudulent accrediting agencies and institutions claiming accreditation. Unsuspecting students are too often caught unawares of accreditation pitfalls and false claims. In their pursuit of education, students are often confronted by appealing advertisements from "degree mills" – educational providers that offer certificates and degrees that may be considered bogus. Complicating student choices even further, some of these institutions claim accreditation by well-named accreditation agencies, which may, too often, turn out to be an "accreditation mills" – controversial providers of accreditation offering a certification of programs or institutions without a proper basis (CHEA, 2008). Recently, honor societies, in their pursuit to recognize high scholarship, are now starting to experience an influx of applications for initiating local honor society chapters. A number of these applications are arriving from institutions who provide arguable quality education and who may claim accreditation from an accreditation mill.

Applications such as these pose a real dilemma for honor societies. Many online programs are of unquestioned high quality from institutions engendering high respect, such as Harvard, Penn State, and Villanova

to name only a very few. Yet there are other honor society applications from far lesser known programs – although it is not the author's claim that lesser known programs are, necessarily, of poor quality. Problematically, not every institution is what it appears to be. In order for a student to be a smart consumer and for an honor society to remain true to the integrity of their missions, it is an imperative to understand accreditation in the United States, how accreditation works, the differences between accredited and non-accredited institutions, and the pitfalls associated with both 'diploma mills" and "accreditation mills".

B. Accreditation in the United States

Within the United States, the most widely recognized accreditation comes from the various regional accrediting organizations (New England, North Central, Southern, Middle States, Northwest, and Western) ("Find Your Online Graduate School", 2008). These are often referred to as the Big Six. Generally, when one speaks of institutional accreditation they are, in most cases, speaking about regional accreditation by one of the Big Six– that is, accreditation at the institutional level.

Besides the six regional accrediting agencies, there are several other widely recognized accrediting bodies. DETC (Distance Education & Training Council), CHEA (the Council for Higher Education Accreditation), and ACICS (the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools) (ACISC, 2008) are some of the very well known accreditation agencies. There are, however, others and the interested reader is encouraged to visit the website (e.Learners.com, 2008) to investigate the list of regional, national, and specialized accrediting agencies.

DETC is a nationally recognized organization accrediting institutions specializing in distance education since 1955 and currently accredits more than 70 home study institutions. Similarly, ACICS has been involved as an accreditor of institutions since 1912 and currently claims to accredit more than 680 institutions throughout the United States and abroad. CHEA, a private, non-governmental agency that does not directly accredit programs itself, is a membership association of approximately 3,000 degree-granting institutions and 60 accrediting organizations. Its purpose is to recognize organizations that accredit institutions and programs. CHEA is the only non-governmental higher education agency that scrutinizes the quality of regional, national, and specialized accrediting organizations.

In addition to regional accreditation and organizations recognizing accreditation agencies, institutions often seek specialized accreditation for individual degree programs offered within various academic settings. ABET (the accreditor for college and university programs in applied science, computing, engineering, and technology) (ABET, 2008) AACSB (an accreditor for undergraduate and graduate education for business administration and accounting) (AACSB, 2008) and NCATE (accreditation agency for teacher education) immediately come to mind. There are also professional organizations such as the ABA (the American Bar Association) (ABA, 2008) and APA (the American Psychological Association) (APA, 2008) that offer accreditation viewed by some to be more favorable than regional accreditation. Nursing also has a specialized accreditation body. Most institutions that possess some kind of program accreditation, such as ABET for individual engineering disciplines, will likely also be regionally accredited by one of the Big Six. Besides regionally accredited institutions and program-specific accreditation, there are a number of state approved and state registered institutions. However, as a bare minimum, "if the institution in question is not state approved (or registered), [it is possible] the institution may not really exist or may not be legal" ("Find Your Online Graduate School", 2008). Regardless, it is far better to feel more comfortable with a regionally accredited institution.

It is important also to note that there is some disparagement directed toward regional accreditation bodies as some claim they tend to be very bureaucratic and unwieldy. Regardless, for the individual student, and for honor societies (often viewed as lending credibility to programs or institutions), it appears essential to stick with widely acknowledged accreditation sources.

To assist with this, the Secretary of Education, via the U.S. Department of Education (DOE), recognizes a group of accreditation agencies. And, while the DOE is NOT responsible for accrediting institutions per se,

accreditation agencies often voluntarily seek recognition from the Secretary of Education. "Accrediting agencies recognized by the Secretary meet certain criteria, the institutions accredited by those agencies meet standards that address the quality of an institution and its programs. An accrediting agency that meets the Department's criteria for recognition is determined to be a reliable authority in measuring the quality of education or training provided by the institutions it accredits in the United States and its territories. Agencies that meet these criteria are placed on the Department's List of Nationally Recognized Accrediting Agencies." (Ed.gov, accreditation, pg 6, 2008)

Both CHEA and the DOE recognize a number of accreditation agencies in common. Members of CHEA must demonstrate their mission and goals are consistent with CHEA guidelines and CHEA publishes a list of postsecondary institutions and programs accredited by accreditation agencies recognized by CHEA or by the U.S. Secretary of Education. The CHEA list may be found online (CHEA, 2008).

One additional comment – and this is of utmost importance. DOE or CHEA, for any number of legitimate reasons, may not recognize some institutions. Perhaps these institutions are in the process of seeking accreditation or perhaps they do not meet the standards required by DOE and/or CHEA. This is not to say that the quality of these institutions or programs is inferior. However it is, nevertheless, a fact that many universities only recognize degrees from institutions accredited by agencies sanctioned by the Secretary of Education. So, let the buyer beware ("Find Your Online Graduate School", 2008).

C. Database of Accredited Programs and Institutions

The U.S. Department of Education has developed "a searchable database" listing accredited postsecondary institutions and programs. The list includes institutions and programs accredited by accrediting agencies or state approval agencies recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education. At present, "the database includes approximately 6,900 postsecondary educational institutions and programs". Moreover, "the U.S. Secretary of Education recognizes those agencies determined to be reliable authorities as to the quality of education or training provided by the institutions of higher education and the higher education programs they accredit. Accreditation of an institution or program by a recognized accrediting agency provides a reasonable assurance of quality and acceptance by employers of diplomas and degrees." (Ed.gov, accreditation, pg 4, 2008)

3. ENROLLMENT TRENDS, ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS, AND HONOR SOCIETIES

A. Enrollment Trends

Online programs have become an integral part of the American educational landscape and statistics demonstrate that "online enrollments have been increasing much faster than overall higher education enrollments". The Sloan report (Allen, 2007) states"… the growth in online course enrollments has been 20 percent per year". The 2007 survey, based on 2006 fall term enrollments, reported that over 3.5 million students (or over 20 percent of all students at degree-granting institutions) enrolled in at least one entirely online course, and that "the 9.7 percent growth rate for online enrollments far exceeds the 1.5 percent growth of the overall higher education student population". (Allen, 2007) But questions regarding the quality of such programs continue to haunt some in academe as well as honor societies.

From the survey above, "over two-thirds of all chief academic officers agree that online is at least as good as traditional classroom education." And, while one may speculate as to why colleges and universities are moving to online, some of the most frequently cited objectives include: improved student access (the main reason), increased rate of degree completion (very important), and growth in continuing and/or professional education to name but a few. Interestingly, cost reduction (reduced or contained costs) was among the least-cited objectives for online education from the institutional perspective (Annual Report, 2007).

Clearly, online programs are here to stay. Their numbers are increasing, and the majority of chief academic officers feel that online education is, in fact, effective. However, data from the Sloan Foundation indicates

that, while the rate of growth for online delivery of education continues to grow and is expected to continue to grow over the near term, the rate itself will not be sustained indefinitely. The facts are that most institutions considering online offerings are already doing so, and those institutions expecting continued growth are those whose programs appear to be already well established.

The question remains – do these programs 'measure up?' And, what are some of the lingering issues? How do online students see their programs and how do these perceptions compare with traditional students? How does faculty teaching in traditional programs view online programs, and how do honor societies react to key issues regarding the quality of programs they sanction?

B. Attitudes and Perceptions: Student Perception and Faculty Acceptance to Online Education

A 2006 study, conducted by the Director of Academic Affairs at Drexel University's e-Learning Center, was undertaken "to examine the similarities and differences between adult students enrolled in online and traditional (on campus) degree programs" (Hartman, 2006). The study involved 2100 adult learners (aged 22 and over); 1050 of whom were engaged in online degree programs and the remaining 1050 students were enrolled in equivalent traditional programs. Responses were obtained from 548 of the students. Interestingly, online students had a higher response rate (27%) than traditional students (23%), while women were more likely to respond than men and older students were also more likely to respond than younger students. While the results were only confined to Drexel and, thus, generalizations might be suspect – the results are, nonetheless, interesting. A few of the findings are presented below as excerpts – slightly modified in format, but essentially taken nearly word for word.

Student Perceptions.

- Overall satisfaction. While over 90% of students stated that they were very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with their degree programs, online students were statistically more likely to say they were 'very satisfied' (61%) vice traditional students (40%).
- Time for family. Traditional students were statistically more likely to report that pursuing their degree program had a "significant negative impact" on their time/activities with their spouse/ significant other, when compared to online students. One out of five traditional students reported experiencing a significant negative impact compared to one out of eight online students.
- Stress factor. Online students were statistically less likely to report that pursuing their degree program had a "significant negative impact" on their stress level when compared to traditional program students (23% vs. 34% respectively).
- Requirements for studying, exams, group projects, and making presentation. Both online and traditional students had statistically similar expectations regarding the following requirements of their degree program; studying, exams, group projects, making presentations, pursuing a degree in general, self-discipline, and determination.
- Basic expectations in reading, studying, writing and presenting. Online students and traditional students reported statistically similar experiences relative to their expectations in the following areas; studying, writing, reading, making presentations and pursuing a degree in general. Even where statistical differences existed, the differences were small.
- Exams and Group Projects. Traditional students were statistically more likely to report that their experiences were "harder" than expected with respect to exams, and group projects.
- Intellectual rigor. Conversely, traditional students were statistically more likely to say their actual experience with respect to intellectual rigor was "much easier" when compared to online students. It should be noted that online students reported much higher expectations of the intellectual rigor of the program and were more likely to find those expectations met. Traditional students, on the other hand, had lower expectations of the intellectual rigor of the program and yet were more likely to find that their actual expe-

rience was easier than had been expected.

Faculty Acceptance: Faculty acceptance raises another important issue – as faculty acceptance of online instruction is viewed as a barrier to a wide adaption of online education. While a number of online institutions do not believe faculty acceptance is of great concern for their own campus, they do see it as a significant barrier to more widespread adoption of online education. According to Allen, Joyce, and Seaman (Allen, 2005), while acknowledging the growth of online education, only a minority of Chief Academic Officers feel that faculty at their institutions accept the value and legitimacy of online education. Further, this level has remained nearly constant from 2003 through 2005.

The Carnegie Classification attempts to identify meaningful similarities and differences among accredited degree-granting colleges and universities in the United States without implying quality differences. In the most recent report, it is interesting to note that only the Associates and Specialized institutions show an increase in the belief of the legitimacy of online programs. Faculties from other types of colleges have diminished confidence in the legitimacy and value of online programs. What appears to be even more interesting is that Chief Academic Officers (CAOs) feel their faculty have a more positive view and more readily place value on online programs they offer. Yet, in the opinion of the authors of this paper and many close colleagues, this does not appear to be the case for faculty other than those in private, for-profit institutions. The Sloan Report (Annual Report, 2007) points out that "with the single exception of private, for-profit institutions, there is no evidence that the increased penetration of online courses and programs in higher education has led to a greater level of acceptance of online education on the part of faculty."

C. Honor Societies.

The Association of College Honor Societies (ACHS) (ACHS, 2008) serves as the umbrella organization for approximately 66 honor societies within the United States. ACHS certifies honor societies meeting minimum scholastic eligibility, governance, and chapter chartering standards in order to foster a cohesive community of national and international honor societies. There is an expectation that the missions of ACHS-member societies shall include: encouraging and recognizing scholarship, service, and superior academic achievement.

ACHS – affiliated honor societies are beginning to receive chapter applications from institutions that offer only online programs. It is clear that many of these programs have begun to seek affiliations with certain recognized honor societies in order to enhance their standing within the academic community. At the time of this writing, the following honor societies have established chapters in online universities:

- Sigma Theta Tau (Nursing)
- Delta Mu Delta (Business Administration)
- Alpha Chi (all academic fields)
- Alpha Phi Sigma (Criminal Justice)

Exactly how honor societies continue to embrace, continue to eschew, or continue to investigate applications from some programs that may be perceived to be of inferior quality is the subject of continuous debate among honor societies.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is essential that individual students and honor societies be able to properly assess and recognize institutional and/or program offerings of high quality. The authors have attempted to present only a very small, limited subset of the widely available information that pertains to the application of academic standards to proliferating online programs. ("Directory of Online Schools", 2008) Many of these programs are outstanding, and most are very credible. But this circumstance is not universally the case. Substantial information (with references) has been presented addressing program / discipline-specific accreditation, regional accreditation, the U.S. Department of Education (U.S. Department of Education, 2008), and agencies such as CHEA. These are tremendous sources of information regarding accreditation of institutions, programs, and the recognition of accreditation agencies themselves.

It is expected that there will be continuing efforts from online universities to establish

ACHS – affiliated honor societies across the broad spectrum of academic disciplines. Certainly for societies wishing to grow their membership base, there is an incentive to establish chapters in online institutions and programs. However, it remains to be seen if all of these societies will consider it in their best long-term interest to approve chapter applications without continued careful consideration of these applications.

The authors of this manuscript respectfully suggest ACHS-affiliated honor societies consider criteria listed below in their deliberations:

- Accept for membership those programs who have well-regarded accreditation in a specific discipline, such as in the computing disciplines – ABET for Computer Science, Computer and Information Sciences, Information Systems, Information Technology, Computer Engineering, and Software Engineering.
- Accept for membership programs in an institution that is regionally accredited by one of the big six (New England, North Central, Southern, Middle States, Northwest, and Western), and, further, if the application originates from a satellite campus, regional accreditation must extend to these campuses.
- Accept for membership a program or institution (or satellite campus) possessing accreditation by one of the accreditation agencies recognized by CHEA.

Care must be exercised in recognizing a new influx of online programs applying for ACHS-honor society membership.

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