Unresolved Obstacles To The Credibility Of Online Degrees

By Craig Howard / February 2010

"This is too much work for an online class."

For the last two years I've heard that comment repeatedly from students. I've been teaching since 1995, but about two years ago, I started teaching online.

The "too much work" these students refer to is actually the exact same amount of work as in the face-to-face equivalent course. So what's behind what these students are saying?

These comments hint at a public expectation, an image that challenges the online instructor in a unique way. From my own vantage point, teaching asynchronous university-required education courses, I don't see this phenomenon going away very soon. The economic downturn has been opportune for universities to move classes online. Delivering courses online, they believe, is simply more cost effective, and in this climate, the public is more than open to cost-cutting measures.

However, universities are large institutions where one hand may not know what the other hand is doing. Those who promote online learning are not the ones questioning how it is done. Educators know that the effective delivery of online courses requires sophisticated approaches and designs (Hara, 2000; Motteram & Forrester, 2005). But while universities strive to offer more and more online courses, I still find that my colleagues in hiring positions look unfavorably on those who have degrees from online institutions. Four contributors strike me as playing a part in creating this image.

1. Degree Mills
Parodies such as Saturday Night Live's Westfield College Online skit should open our eyes to how pervasive scandals can be. The spoof is a mock advertisement that one can easily mask a bogus institution's identity and be hired on par with legitimate degree holders after a few payments and three months of waiting. SNL found rich material in poking fun at online degrees' credibility, not because of the absurdity, but because of the plausibility.

America is home to 810 bogus universities, accordingly to Business Weekly (2010). Although scandalized, the duped employer is not the only victim. Everyone involved in online education feels the pain from negative publicity related to online learning. While a recent study found that the credibility of online degrees is now stronger than five years ago and that 90 percent of organizations now would recognize the credential, it also said that 63 percent of employers would, everything else being equal, hire someone who went to a traditional college over someone with an online degree (Narisi2009). That these bogus institutions even attempt to "accredit" themselves can only make it harder for the public to accept online degrees (Armour, 2003; Brendler, 2010). But there are real challenges less bogus than the degree mills.

2. Cheating's Too Easy (At Least They Think It Is)
Issues surrounding the "On the internet, no one knows you're a dog" theme continue (Steiner, 1993). We all too often forget that the socio-technical context of sitting behind a screen still allows for a breakdown in trust. Even if institutions have taken steps to increase security, a secure image may not be out there.

There has been plenty of research into keeping out those who want to get in. Kling and Courtright (2003), for example, outlined the different access-limiting designs used by different genres of websites ranging from financial institutions with "Electronic locks" to academic forums that require institutional email addresses—but this is only half the issue.