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Our Universities: Residence in the Ether

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Our Universities: Residence in the Ether

Universities must change so that we may better serve our students. Evermore frequently the call for universities will be to specifically meet the needs of each student in a unique fashion. Distance education, correctly constructed, gives great opportunity to do just that.

Just in case, giving way to the delivery of higher education "just in time" and very soon to the delivery of education "just for you."

Molly Corbett Broad, Former President UNC

Remember when all universities had a residency requirement that went something like this: 30 Credit hours of the last 36 credit hours must be taken on campus. Simple and direct. These requirements were in place so that someone did not transfer all but the last 3 credit hours in from a host of other colleges and then claim to have graduated from North Carolina, Texas, Illinois, California, or MIT for example.

The requirement existed for two reasons.

First, the institutions wanted to be able to capitalize on their mark or brand, although everyone had the good sense not to call it that. It was thought of as earned reputation. The students and families knew quality and the universities wanted to be able to assure all that the degree granted meant something.

Secondly, and more importantly, the universities actually believed they had something vital and of great value to offer to students and those students should genuinely partake of that offering because it was part of the university mission. Not because: the university needed the enrollment; wanted to secure jobs for faculty and staff; coveted good attendance at football, basketball, softball or volleyball outings; increased student numbers would warrant pay increases; or they would own bragging rights about how big they were compared to their competitors.

Not for any of these flimsy reasons. The real reason that the residency requirements existed was that a good university creates an **intellectual village**, unique to the faculty, place, time, and that students would benefit for life by being associated with a particular institution intellectually.

This is a good reason to do something. It is all about motive.

There are many institutions trying to increase distance education offerings for reasons that do not have to do with the **intellectual village**, above are just a few examples.

To be sure, these are the wrong reasons to do anything on a university campus. There is a good reason though for distance learning, and it is simply this, residency in the ether, on the wire, through the internet, is the way that a good deal of learning will take place in the future. (Some call it life-long learning, but I don't like that moniker as it is redundant, real learning is always for life.) We are building a different kind of **intellectual village** not completely defined by geography, important thought that may be, but made unique by a calculus of interest.

In the future distance education should be required for all students. I would offer that there should be two kinds of residency...30 credit hours on campus, and just to start an argument, 15 hours in any student degree program must be achieved via distance education. In meeting this requirement, the courses should come from any university the student chooses, showing no bias for or against the geographic institution from which the student plans to graduate.

For example, a student interested in a particular aspect of electrical engineering might take as course or courses at MIT, Stanford, Berkeley or the University of Illinois, the four best intellectual villages for electrical engineering in the world by some measures. A student interested in the philosophy of John Dewey might take a course at Southern Illinois University. In history, the University of Virginia, Columbia, Michigan might get the nod. And every student can create a vibrant **intellectual village** based on their interests and combined with the village that they choose to associate with as an alma mater.

Two different villages: one ether, one earth.

Here is what will never work. Requiring students to take courses via distance education from a geographic university in which they are enrolled. It is unnecessary and while asynchronous possibility is provided, distance is never as good in any other dimension from an intellectual perspective as *in-situ* instruction in an apples to apples comparison. Such requirements provide little benefit other than producing income, headcount, and possibly reduced operating costs. Absolutely the wrong motive.

And students are like dogs, they can smell motive when it crosses the state line. It leaks out of a place and can't be contained. And if the motive is not directed at creating **intellectual villages** the air is fouled with missed propose.

If on-line education is created for the right purpose it will expand the horizons of students and better prepare them for the kinds of continuing education, meetings, professional interaction, and experiences that define the contemporary world and make them better citizens.

Some students may want to take a course from the University of Phoenix is a synapse, not a village of any kind. I think their number would be small. The University of Phoenix caters to a population that *intellectual villages* cannot, and they do it well. The market place is speaking to all of us.

Our universities need to check motive on every action to best prepare students for positive citizenship and a productive life.