

Chapter II

Ethical Conundrums in Distance Education Partnerships

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ABSTRACT

Launching and sustaining innovative new academic programs is typically a complex enterprise, especially distance education projects, and more particularly, such initiatives attempted by individual institutions with little or no prior experience in this arena. Inherently parochial, colleges and universities usually experiment with online courses on their own, but increasingly, as institutions engage in more ambitious efforts to develop full programs of study offered at a distance, they are recognizing, enthusiastically or reluctantly, that collaborative arrangements may make the difference between success and failure, especially for those with little expertise and few start-up resources. Partnerships are being forged between two or more higher education entities, and even more remarkably, there is growing evidence of academic institutions partnering with for-profit corporate organizations. Unfortunately, these unions too often result in more collisions than collaborations, especially when there are differing values among the parties involved. Through the presentation of selected mini-case studies representing several actual higher education-corporate partnerships, this chapter identifies and analyzes a number of ethical dilemmas, some philosophical and others practical, which should be considered by those who enter into distance education partnerships.

INTRODUCTION

The relatively sparse body of literature on the topic of ethics in distance education is now finally being augmented, as evidenced in this volume,

as well as a few other selected publishing and presentation venues. To date, most work on this subject has taken a microview, focusing primarily on ethical issues that may arise with individual faculty and students, or within teacher-student

relationships in the distance environment. Another approach has been the interest in so-called values education or character education, in hopes that education can promote the “right” values and foster ethical behavior. Less common is attention to the **macroview** of distance education ethics, that is, at the organizational level. It is this author’s working assumption that academic quality and ethical integrity of any distance education course depends approximately 50% on the individual faculty responsible for that offering (microlevel), and 50% on other academic officers who plan, manage and evaluate distance education programs and courses (**macrolevel**). This author leaves it to fellow contributors in this volume to further address critical forces at the microlevel; he here attempt to extend the discussion by examining related questions regarding ethical **dilemmas** from a broader **macro** perspective.

In an era that seems to amplify a decline in public morality, corporate scandals, and global conflict, these well-publicized events are assumed to influence attitudes about individual ethical behavior, especially among the younger citizenry who witness their elders engaged in chronic misdeeds. There is evidence that as many as three-quarters of students today admit to some form of academic fraud, most commonly in the form of cheating on exams and plagiarism. This has caused considerable concern among faculty, especially those who teach at a distance, that students enrolled in such courses and programs are particularly vulnerable to unethical behaviors, and at the very least, to uncivil behavior in online discourse. As a result, institutions and instructors have taken great pains in recent years, as distance education offerings have proliferated, to address ethics related to computer usage, and formulate policies that provide guidelines for students. Virtually every institution has established a set of well-promulgated regulations for students to follow, designed to ensure some semblance of ethical behavior in classrooms and cyberspace.

Curiously, despite this heightened attention to ethical practice, directed primarily at consumers of distance education, those who plan, manage and evaluate distance education activities seem to give little attention to ethical practice as providers. This is not to suggest that unethical behavior is noticeably rampant in the distance education arena, but rather to note that the telecommunications revolution in academe has provided significant opportunity for new initiatives, growth and income and, with this development, there are also situations in which individuals and organizations can easily overlook, or perhaps ignore, areas in which their own ethics may, at times, be compromised.

Should the establishment and monitoring of a set of standards for ethical practice in distance education be the responsibility of a government, an NGO, a national association of providers, institutional providers, or self-regulating by individual faculty (ICDE Dusseldorf 2001 Conference)? Who is to blame, and what is the degree of liability when students become victims of poor quality in distance education? At present, there is no recognized body that ensures the adoption or enforcement of a code of ethics for distance education. In their rush to capitalize on the burgeoning distance education market, many institutions, in addition to having little resident expertise in technology-aided pedagogy, certainly have little awareness of potential ethical considerations in this arena.

DISTANCE EDUCATION PARTNERSHIPS

Organizational arrangements in which **partners** with differing attitudes and values enter into collaborative agreements to design and deliver new academic programs are increasingly common. Long known for their parochial approach in the knowledge industry, colleges and universities

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