

Merits, drawbacks of online learning debated

WASHINGTON (AP) — Farzad Naeim, an earthquake engineer from Los Angeles who decided to go to law school, didn't have time for campus meetings and classroom lectures. So when Kaplan's Concord Law School was launched last fall, Naeim enrolled to get his education over the Internet.

"I figure if I go to a standard school four nights a week, that eliminates the chance for me to see my kids grow up," said Naeim, 44. "I get my assignments off the computer, and I can study after the kids go to bed."

Hundreds of universities are launching courses or degree programs online. But a pair of reports being released Wednesday question whether a seat in front of a computer is as good as a seat in a college classroom.

The reports question whether the programs' effectiveness is evaluated properly, whether they cost too much and if they are unfair to certain students.

The College Board warns in its report that Internet courses could hinder the progress of poor and minority students who arrive at college with less exposure to computers than white or more affluent students.

"There's this rush to get online and go virtual ... Colleges, policy-makers and (Internet) providers who are driving this market need to think about broad access," Larry F. Gladieux, a senior College Board researcher, said.

A second report, by the Institute for Higher Education Policy, says colleges still lack enough knowledge about Internet-based education to justify its rapid growth.

For example, studies haven't explained a higher dropout rate for Internet-based learners — 32 percent compared with 4 percent for classroom students in one study — or looked at whether students do better from Internet instruction alone or from a mix of Internet and classroom learning.

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JAMIE MERISOTIS
president of Institute for Higher Education Policy

grades of distance learners are higher or comparable," said Jamie Merisotis, president of the institute that did the study for two teachers' unions.

"We don't know whether the poorer performers are dropping out at a higher rate," she said.

Right now, 26,000 courses online teach roughly 750,000 students. They include the online law school and courses at Stanford University, the University of California in Los Angeles, and Duke University.

The most visible advance, supporters said, is the first-time accreditation of a wholly online school. Students at Jones International University, operated out of Denver, now have such privileges as transferring credits and earning employer tuition reimbursements.

"I wondered if I was going to get a quality education," said Joan Crittenden, a Navy safety official from Waldorf, Md., who received her master's degree in business communications from Jones in December. "I actually think I did get a better education. More of the resources were at my fingertips."

Distance learning started with classes taken by mail or by watching teachers' lectures on videos or cable television.

But unlike correspondence school or video-lecture predecessors, Internet-based distance learning has a place on campus, too.

Deborah Everhart, a medieval studies professor at Georgetown University, holds traditional and online classes and said professors who have mastered e-mail now use

Web pages to post course readings, homework and bulletin boards where students can leave messages.

"There are students I might not ordinarily hear from in class," Everhart said. "But in a chat room, they feel freer to state their opinions and ask their questions."

Matthew Pittinsky is a co-founder of Washington-based Blackboard Inc., which creates and maintains Internet sites for college courses. "There's no question, there is a market," Pittinsky said.

Colleges' reliance on technology marketed by Blackboard, Real Education of Denver and Convene in San Francisco has led to criticism that the ventures are more about higher profits than higher learning.

College officials worried over enrollment increases and budget cuts could be easily seduced by pitches that virtual learning cuts the costs of "bricks and mortar" learning, College Board's Gladieux said.

But they need to ensure equal access, he said, noting that a technological divide still exists. For example, computers are in 75 percent of households with incomes over \$75,000, but just 20 percent of households making less than \$15,000 have computers or daily access.

Andrew Rosen of Kaplan notes that a law degree from Kaplan's Concord Law School costs up to \$21,000, including the cost of a computer, rather than \$80,000 for a more traditional law school.

"Online education has the potential to close a lot of the gaps that exist right now," Rosen said.

Paper sues Pennsylvania over alcohol publicity law

■ **The Pitt News says not allowing a college paper to publicize events using alcohol is censorship.**

The Pitt News
University of Pittsburgh

PITTSBURGH, Penn. (U-Wire) — Believing it could be fined for printing a restaurant review mentioning the availability of alcohol, the University of Pittsburgh student newspaper, The Pitt News, on Tuesday filed a federal lawsuit against the commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

The suit charges that a state law, known as Act 199, violates First Amendment freedom of the press because it prohibits alcohol advertising in college media.

"This case is about who decides what students publish and say," said Witold "Vic" Walczak, director of the Pittsburgh American Civil Liberties Union. "Politicians in Harrisburg have no business making those kinds of decisions."

The lawsuit asks the court to declare Act 199 unconstitutional and to repeal it.

Judge William Standish declined to immediately issue an emergency

temporary injunction, which would keep the state from enforcing the law until the matter has been resolved in court.

Standish tentatively scheduled a hearing for the week of April 19 to hear arguments and decide whether to issue a preliminary injunction at that time.

The American Civil Liberties Union student club at Pitt has joined The Pitt News as a plaintiff. The Pitt Legal Income Sharing Foundation is mentioned in the suit but is not a plaintiff.

Under Act 199, The Pitt News cannot accept any advertisements that promote alcohol. In the past year, the newspaper has lost approximately \$20,000 because of Act 199 limitations.

The ACLU Club and PLISF cannot advertise that alcohol will be served at their events. They say Act 199 violates their right to freedom of speech.

Walczak said that the law is intended to curb underage drinking, which he said is a major problem. A better method, he said, is to enforce drinking laws and to educate young people about the effects of alcohol abuse.

"Usurping editorial control" and "censoring students" are not the ways to tackle the problem, Walczak said.

Walczak and The Pitt News editor in chief, Hal Turner, said they knew of no other states that had laws similar to Act 199.

Describing the law as "unconscionable," Turner said, "We're hoping that the constitutionality of this [law] is going to be so obvious in the eyes of the judge that this will be overturned."

Walczak said other schools in Pennsylvania had expressed interest in the lawsuit.

He declined to identify those schools and said he did not think they would join the suit.

He added that several non-university publications, such as In Pittsburgh and the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, are allowed to advertise alcohol because they are not run by or specifically targeted toward students.

But, Walczak said, students have ready access to those publications, subverting Act 199's goal.

And according to the lawsuit, 75.1 percent of Pitt's student body is over the age of 21.

Ultimately, he said, the state must prove that Act 199 does reduce underage drinking.

"What happens when you put on the Penguins, the Steelers, the Pirates at night?" Walczak said. "Do you ever see an alcohol ad?"

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