

Motion on Distance Learning

from the Committee on Academic Programs and Policies and the University Faculty Committee

WHEREAS, distance learning, being a form of instruction, is an academic matter and therefore a faculty prerogative requiring consultation through the system of faculty governance, and

WHEREAS, the administration has proposed to create a for-profit corporation to engage in distance learning, and

WHEREAS, a for-profit academic enterprise raises serious concerns about the maintenance of the University's fundamental public service mission and about the protection of academic freedom,

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the Faculty Senate expects to participate with the Administration and Trustees in the development of principles and plans for distance learning. Such plans, once formulated, should be presented to the Faculty Senate for faculty review.

Rationale

The motion is supported by the basic principle of the importance of faculty governance over academic matters. Distance learning programs are clearly academic matters, as they involve instruction. Therefore, before creating any plan for distance learning structures, the Cornell Administration should respect faculty governance processes by initiating faculty participation, through the Faculty Senate, on the principles and plans for distance learning. This faculty participation is essential throughout the planning process to ensure faculty autonomy over academic matters, including final Faculty Senate review of any plans formulated. Participation by disinterested faculty is also vital throughout the execution of whatever plan may be implemented.

The Administration, without consultation with or review by the Faculty Senate, has proposed a plan to create a for-profit corporation to engage in distance learning. This proposal raises serious questions:

- 1) Can a University maintain its fundamental public service mission while participating in for-profit educational enterprises? A for-profit corporation exists for the purpose of making profits as a return to its shareholders. As a not-for-profit institution of higher education, the university's purpose is to serve the common good rather than any private

interests. The proposed for-profit corporation for distance learning, therefore, raises serious concerns about the potential conflict between the goal of profit-making and the goal of education in the public interest.

(over)

2) Can the academic freedom of the faculty be maintained in the face of potential external pressure from investors or sponsors of a for-profit enterprise? Academic freedom depends on faculty independence from individuals or entities who may seek to influence teaching and research, including independence from corporate funders. This independence is often described as creating a "wall of separation" between the university and outside funders. Deliberations about the proposed for-profit corporation will include the question of whether this wall of separation would be eroded, as the for-profit corporation would create a new relationship with corporate funders. As venture capitalists and corporate investors in a for-profit corporation, corporate funders would become shareholders of the for-profit distance learning corporation and would likely hold positions on the Board of Directors. This intermingling of corporate investors and academic activities raises serious questions about maintaining the independence of the university, which is vital to academic freedom.

Given the serious nature of these concerns about preserving both the University's public service mission and academic freedom, it is imperative for the faculty to fully discuss and deliberate the implications of distance learning structures. The faculty, through the Faculty Senate, must be given full participation in the development of principles and plans for distance learning.

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