

Global Academy Online, Inc.

The Father of Online College Rankings Speaks Out

In 2002, Dr. Fred DiUlus started to rate and rank online universities. He did it for free and he continues to do it for free as a public service uninhibited by advertising or hidden agendas.

His eBook rating of online accredited universities is the Best Worst Online Degree Programs. He was the first in the world to do it. No one in academia, he says, seriously paid online universities much mind nor took them very seriously in early 2000. Mainstream educators, for the most part, thought online education was of no useful value except to gin up buckets of money for the for-profit, privately run, online schools.

Some of the most successful financially he says are the public companies that run the University of Phoenix, Capella University, and Grand Canyon University along with several others. Many desperate, financially hard-pressed traditional non-profit schools in need of more money have found online education to be the quintessential 'cash cow'. Their entry into the market place has legitimized to a large extent the total online for-profit industry.

Even though the schools that are for-profit are severely criticized for what many feel are obscene profits at the expense of education, the view and perception of online education has changed dramatically in the last eight years. Growth of online program providers that DiUlus currently rates has gone from a little over 20 in 2002 to over 300 in 2010.

Dr. DiUlus credits a growing positive view of online education coming not only from the early adopter, non traditional, students heading back to school to get their postponed degrees, but also from the new overwhelming number of traditional students who have experienced both classroom and online education before entering college. DiUlus cites his own research that shows a new generation of scholars believes by a margin of three to one, that online education beats learning in a classroom hands down.

Today's global economic climate has financially challenged many institutions that are heavily vested in brick and mortar projects forcing them, whether they like it or not, to seek out funds wherever it might lead. For most that has lead to offering online classes. However, DiUlus points to online programs at some large schools as financial disasters. MIT, Columbia, and The University of Illinois at Urbana are just three examples he cites. "MIT and Columbia pulled the plug years ago and literally all of MIT's 1500 online courses are now free. Illinois, on the other hand is a recent tragedy. They inescapably could not seem to get out of their own way, says DiUlus, to manage the program properly.

DiUlus argues that leadership from the top must be dedicated, persistent and passionate about the contribution online education will make to a university. Frankly, he says it must shake off the traditional fears of alumni and 'set in their ways' faculty.

The University of Akron is an example of forward thinking leadership in DiUlus' book where the school rates near the top in online programs. Illinois can barely muster a so-so ranking and MIT and Columbia are not even rated.

"From the beginning" DiUlus states, "I wanted to provide the most objective and realistic evaluation. I scrubbed the name off the building. I wanted to know what was inside and who the leaders were. I wanted to know if the professors could teach online and if so were their students walking away with a first rate education." That, he said, smacked in the face of how schools were traditionally rated. Take away the sports teams, the buildings, the alumni, the research grants, and a recognized scholar here and there and you find a school laid-bare. "You see", he says, "only the faculty, the administration and the students in the end count and if push comes to shove we can ditch the administration." This is the only way you can judge online schools he says. The rest is window dressing.

Traditional schools entering online education do not necessarily provide the best programs. The fact is, DiUlus comments, that many in higher education heading for retirement in the next five to ten years could care less whether their university succeeds in online education. "Many tenured faculty pay lip service to the phenomena and know something has to be done about it but that's it for them." That attitude DiUlus points out, leaves the door open for the new giants of higher education tomorrow who may neither be the traditional college or colleges born and bred in the USA.

Many of today's seasoned academics grouse that they can't retain the copyright from the development of their courses online and that they are being severely restricted in both the design and delivery of classes they create online smothering their academic freedom to do what they want versus what they can do in a classroom. This rubs off on the students as it did in Illinois, MIT and Columbia and the students will walk away. Add in the growing generation gap between older professors and younger students separated by a huge technology gap, DiUlus concludes, and it clearly illustrates the distance between student and faculty has never been greater or more dramatic.

It's a serious public relations foul-up says DiUlus but the schools are afraid if they push too hard, their traditional courses will be skewered. "Schools are afraid of ruffling the feathers of alumni, benefactors and faculty while knowing full well that their students already know that online delivery is better. DiUlus says it's a nasty Catch 22 for traditional schools.

As a result, new startup and older exclusive online schools are chipping away at the market share of traditional colleges and the onslaught of well-funded, highly effective online learning machines are hitting American shores. The traditional education industry in America DiUlus says is in for a massive shakeup of revolutionary proportions.

A fundamentally sound education taught online does not require bricks or mortar. It requires, DiUlus says, passionately dedicated online teachers who can deliver a first rate education online. Premier universities of the future are those that will do justice to both sides of the house equally. Several of his top ten ranked online schools evidence that very fact. He warns that if traditional schools, no matter how old or how long they have been around don't grab hold of this and do it right, they will cease to exist.

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