



## Views

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### Time for a Game of HORSE

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By **John F. Ebersole**

An indicator that President Obama and his secretary of education, Arne Duncan, may be too busy for their regular basketball games is the apparent breakdown in communication between the White House and the Department of Education. How else can we understand the fact that the president is calling for an increase in college graduation rates at the same time that Duncan's agency is busy erecting barriers to access and seeking to reduce the capacity of institutions to meet this goal?

Echoing the alarm first sounded by then-Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings and her Commission on the Future of Higher Education in 2006, President Obama has correctly pointed out that the U.S. needs to increase degree completion over the next 10 years if it is to maintain its economic vitality and be competitive in the global market. What he has not said is that failure to meet this challenge will result in more jobs going overseas and a net decrease in personal income (points made by the Spellings Commission).

Additionally, the president has said little so far to suggest he knows that we cannot reach his goal without paying more attention to those already in the work force. Even if those colleges serving traditional-aged students (18 to 24) were on board and heeding his call (and they are not), it is estimated that we would still fall 20 percent short of his ambitious college completion goal.

Nearly 70 percent of American workers do not have a degree, but some 50 million have "some college." This is where we should focus. However, for these working adults to go back to school, they need access to programs that allow them to remain employed, and support their families, while doing so.

Until now, working adults have had access to hundreds of high-quality online degree programs from a variety of public and private, nonprofit and for-profit providers. The asynchronous format of these offerings has proven beneficial to those who cannot attend time and place specific courses.

At a time when public institutions are being forced to increase tuition and enforce enrollment limits, the Education Department has declared war on the proprietary sector, questioning the credibility of all such institutions because of the sins of a few, and embraced an outdated definition of a "credit hour" in a way that challenges all nontraditional practices, chilling any attempt at innovation.

Now, with its policy requiring colleges to certify that they are authorized in every state in which they operate, it is seeking to suppress the growth of online learning (the only place in the higher education infrastructure where there is capacity equal to the president's goal).

Effective July 1 of this year, the Education Department will require every online program, whether offered by Harvard or the University of Phoenix, to meet the approval standards of every state in which it has students or faculty members -- potentially 54 separate jurisdictions -- to qualify to award financial aid. Failure to comply will lead to aid repayment and a fine.

With nearly three-quarters of all accredited institutions now offering at least some programs online, there are 3,000 institutions that will potentially need to seek approval for each of the programs they offer. In some states this will require a review of every course syllabus and every instructor's CV. The fact that the institution has been around for a couple of hundred years, has Nobel laureates on its faculty and has been regionally accredited since such a test of legitimacy existed, is of no consequence. And some states' requirements call

for a physical site visit at the offering institution's expense.

As if this were not sufficiently daunting, those seeking to comply with the Education Department's edict will be referred to state higher education offices that have been drastically downsized because of budget cuts (some report having but a single person dedicated to conducting these reviews). One state has already indicated that it could take a year for it to determine how they will respond to the expected avalanche of applications.

So here we are. The president, supported by the work of leading foundations, has given us an important goal, one that we need to take seriously. Yet, we can't get near the desired endpoint without the help of the one form of education that has the capacity to serve displaced adolescents and adult students alike – online learning. Use of this powerful tool is about to be limited as both degree-granting institutions and state officials struggle with the burden of universal registration. Additionally, the cost of compliance could easily run to \$100,000 per institution (or \$300 million when all online providers are considered). This will only add to the cost of education.

Other alternatives include suspending online programs altogether, or not offering them in difficult or nonresponsive states. How this supports the president and his goal is far from clear.

If President Obama wants to reduce federal regulation and increase degree completion, he and Secretary Duncan need to find time for a game of HORSE.

*John F. Ebersole is president of Excelsior College. He is testifying today before U.S. House education committee about these regulations.*