



# The Distance Learner

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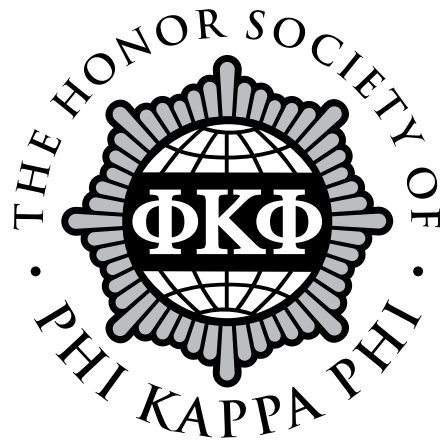
THE HONOR SOCIETY OF  
**PHI KAPPA PHI**

A White Paper by The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi



# Phi Kappa Phi and the Distance Learner

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## **A Report of the Membership Opportunities Committee**

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## **Executive Summary**

Dr. Paul J. Ferlazzo, President of The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi, appointed a Membership Opportunities Committee (MOC) for the 2004-2007 triennium to answer the question: “Are chapters initiating their distance education students?” The purpose of this white paper is to provide chapters with the necessary background, discussion of the issues, and future direction of distance education. This information will encourage and enable chapters to identify, initiate, and provide services for distance learners whom they believe embody the qualities of Phi Kappa Phi.

For purposes of this paper, distance education (DE) refers to any type of for-credit instruction in which the mode of delivery is not face-to-face and/or is not campus-based. Though it has a 150-year history, today DE is almost synonymous with online courses. In the United States more than 2.35 million students are estimated to be enrolled in online courses. Many believe that incorporating and ensuring the quality of online instruction is the most important issue that higher education has faced in the past hundred years. Enrollments in online courses in the United States have grown approximately 20% per year since 2002, and more than 90% of public institutions, approximately half of private, non-profit institutions, and more than 80% of for-profit institutions in the United States offer at least one online or blended course. DE is convenient as well as flexible and enables institutions to reach those who are limited by time, space, or physical ability. DE can be costly, and online access may be directly correlated to measures of a student’s socioeconomic class. In addition, DE requires no less overall time commitment than traditional classes.

DE students tend to be nontraditional, but many campus-based students are enrolling in online courses because they can more easily find the courses they want to take at times that they want to take them. Although research has found no significant difference in learning outcomes through education obtained in DE courses, resistance among students, faculty, and even politicians and employers still exists. Researchers agree that the undergraduate experience cannot be simulated via DE, but research also shows that DE courses can create a sense of community. Central to the issue of acceptability has been the need for standards. Thus, accreditation agencies and related organizations such as the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, the Sloan Consortium, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, and the American Federation of Teachers all have established criteria for DE courses.

Challenges for Phi Kappa Phi include identifying DE students, overcoming remaining resistance to accepting DE Students into membership, effectively initiating DE students, and ensuring access to all member services. Phi Kappa Phi has the opportunity to lead other honor societies in coming to grips with how to handle the DE student. Because no difference apparently exists between the capacity of DE students and traditional students to meet the objectives of Phi Kappa Phi, there should be no difference in Phi Kappa Phi’s willingness to initiate DE versus traditional students.

## **Glossary of Terms**

**Authentication** – a process whereby a faculty member is assured that the person completing the work online is the student enrolled in the course. Many institutions rely on the honor system; others have put into place controls such as fingerprint sensors.

**Blended course** – a course that is taught in the traditional classroom but uses online or other distance education components. This is the most common form of online instruction.

**Destination course** – a course that is taught face-to-face but in a remote location. An example would be a course taught by a faculty member on a military base.

**Dual mode course** – same as blended course. Dual mode also refers to an institution that offers both traditional and distance education classes.

**Traditional student** – as it relates to distance education, a traditional student is one who takes nearly all his/her courses on campus and in a classroom setting with a professor and fellow classmates. A traditional student may also refer to a student of typical college age, i.e. 18-22.

**Unbundling** – the decentralization of control of a course; in other words, a faculty member may be responsible for content but IT staff may be responsible for course design and delivery.

*“In an era when many students have never known life without the Internet, when time is constrained for adult learners seeking additional education, and when worldwide demand for education is at an all-time high, the classroom no longer bounds the learning environment.”*

*ACE/Educause, 2001*

## **Background**

Dr. Paul J. Ferlazzo, President of The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi, appointed a Membership Opportunities Committee (MOC) for the 2004-2007 triennium. The committee was chaired by immediate past Society president Dr. Wendell H. McKenzie. Its charge was to answer the question: “Are Phi Kappa Phi chapters initiating their distance education students?” After several in-depth and thought-provoking discussions (face-to-face and teleconference) and an initial review of current practices, the MOC concluded that many, but not all, chapters do capitalize upon the opportunity to initiate deserving students participating in distance education.

The purpose of this white paper is to provide chapters with the necessary background, discussion of the issues, and future direction of distance education. This information will encourage and enable them to identify, initiate, and provide services for distance learners whom they believe embody the qualities of Phi Kappa Phi.

## **What Is Distance Education?**

For years, distance education (DE) was defined simply as “the quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner, the use of technical media and the provision of two-way communication” (Keegan cited in Schrum, 2002, p. 6). Today, however, no commonly accepted definition exists. Most educators agree that DE refers to the instructor and the student being separated by time, location, or both. Educators also agree that the instruction may be synchronous or asynchronous and that a wide variety of media may be used—in other words, there is no one type of pedagogy for DE.

For purposes of this paper, DE refers to any type of for-credit instruction in which the mode of delivery is not face-to-face and/or is not campus-based. This definition includes online courses, dual-mode or blended courses, telecampus or satellite downlinks, print, CD or mail-based courses, destination courses, or any other nontraditional delivery technique.

## **A Brief History**

DE had its roots with Sir Isaac Pitman in 1840 in the development of mail-based correspondence courses (Matthews, 1999). These courses were unidirectional and were designed for those who could not attend regular classes (Schrum). Catching on quickly as a way to educate the masses and alleviate the problem of exclusivity in higher education, this type of DE became available at many prestigious institutions in Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia and Japan (Matthews;

Bates, 2000). The first department of correspondence teaching, founded around the turn of the nineteenth century, was located at the University of Chicago (Bates). For the next seventy-five years, DE was a constant, albeit minor, player in higher education around the globe.

In 1969, the British Open University was founded and began a transition into autonomous as well as dual mode, mixed media, or blended education. Not only were students mailed written materials, but they also were sent audio and video tapes that were supplemented by telephone interaction (Matthews; Bates). It was also around this time that the first satellite downlinks were used in DE. But the real surge in DE came with the introduction of the personal computer and the arrival of the World Wide Web. Almost overnight, the availability of DE through online courses grew exponentially.

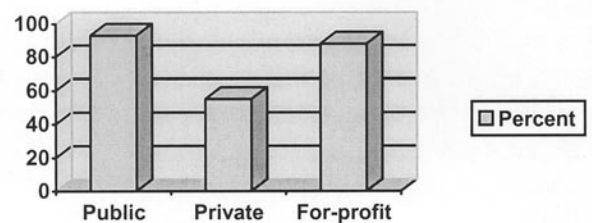
Although this paper recognizes the existence of other forms of DE, today DE is almost synonymous with online courses — by far the most prevalent form of DE being offered and for which policies have literally been rewritten (Carnevale, July 2004; Foster, 2006; Eaton, 2001). Receptivity to online courses by traditional accrediting agencies spurred their development. Research noting their effectiveness and pitfalls quickly followed.

Today, in the United States alone, more than 2.35 million students are estimated to be enrolled in online courses (Sloan Consortium, 2005). How many of these students are seeking an online degree or are merely taking online courses is unclear. Many educators and policy makers believe that incorporating and ensuring the quality of online instruction may be the most important issue that higher education has faced in the past hundred years (Miller and Lu, 2003). Andrew Rosen, president of Kaplan, Inc., a leading provider of education around the world, predicts that online programs will one day be included in the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings in higher education (Carnevale, January 2004).

## Scope and Characteristics

The growth of DE in this country and around the world is phenomenal. According to the Sloan report, enrollments in online courses in the United States have grown approximately 20% per year since 2002, which “far exceeds” the overall growth rate in higher education (Sloan Consortium, 2002; Sloan Consortium, 2003; Sloan Consortium 2005). As Figure 1 shows, more than 90% of public institutions, approximately half of private, non-profit institutions, and more than 80% of for-profit institutions in the United States offer at least one online

**Figure 1. Percentage of Universities Offering Online or Blended Courses**



or blended course (Sloan Consortium 2003; Going the Distance, 2006). Online degree programs are offered in 34% of all U. S. institutions: in 49% of public institutions; in 22% of private, non-profit institutions; and in 20% of private, for-profit institutions (Sloan Consortium, 2002). Although little data exist for the number of degree programs offered through other DE media such as tele-campus or destination courses, it is logical that these programs would increase the total. In 2002, 11% of all higher education students in this country took at least one online course (Sloan Consortium, 2002). An article in *The Wall Street Journal* projects that 10% of all degrees awarded will be through online programs by 2008 (Golden, 2006) but that the demand will still exceed the supply. As stated in the Sloan report, it certainly seems that online courses, and thus DE, have entered the mainstream of higher education.

## **Advantages and Disadvantages**

The advantages of DE are many. Through DE, institutions can reach a much wider audience, thus increasing the breadth of their scope as well as connecting with people from many cultures, ethnicities, and otherwise diverse backgrounds. But perhaps the greatest and most often cited advantage of DE is that it is convenient as well as flexible and enables institutions to reach those who are limited by time, space, or physical ability (Geracimos, 2004). Frank Tansey, writing for the online newsletter *Campus Technology*, states, “Online education, despite its rapid growth, is as much a response to the demands for convenience as anything else” (2006, p. 2). One recent, national study reports that 84% of all higher education enrollments are nontraditional students (More than 70 Million..., 2006), a figure obviously spurred on by the convenience of DE.

However, DE can be costly to the institution as well as to the student, and online access may be directly correlated to measures of a student’s socioeconomic class (Carriuolo, 2002). DE also requires no less overall time commitment than traditional classes (Geracimos), for students or for faculty. Another disadvantage is that many students may lack the necessary time-management skills to be successful outside of the traditional classroom structure (O’Lawrence, 2006). In fact, the retention rate for DE tends to be lower than for traditional classes (Golden; Howell, Williams, and Lindsay, 2003).

But DE has literally given many adults with family and work commitments a second chance at an education (*Online Degrees*, 2006; Miller and Lu). DE students tend to be nontraditional. However, through online courses they soon may become the norm in some programs (Black, Dawson, and Ferdig, 2006). The typical DE student is older, more motivated and disciplined, and has higher grade expectations (University of Idaho, 9). He/she may also be married and work full time (Sikora, 2002).

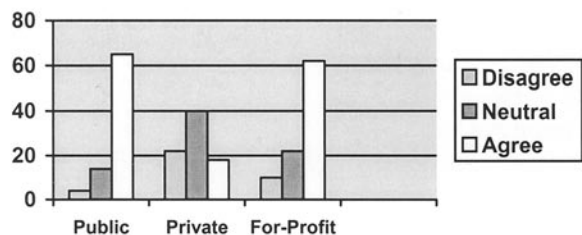
Not all DE students fit this profile. Many campus-based students are enrolling in online courses because they can more easily find the courses they want to take at times that they want to take them (Carnevale, July 2004). With 60% of today's students attending more than one college (Zernike, 2006), the "swirling, mix and match, cut and paste, grab and go" mentality referred to in *The New York Times* obviously has implications for DE. Using online courses as a means to satisfy general education requirements as well as to complete two-year certificate programs is popular (Geracimos). But some educators worry that students may be getting a degree, but not an education, when they tailor-make their curriculum (Zernike).

## Quality Issues

Student satisfaction is thought to be an indicator of teaching effectiveness (Sikora), and not all students appear satisfied with their online experience. The Sloan study (2003) reports that only 40% of institutions surveyed believe their students were at least as satisfied with DE as with a traditional classroom experience. Those attending larger schools were thought to be more satisfied with DE as were those working toward advanced degrees. Sikora found that about half of the students she surveyed were "equally satisfied" with their DE experience, but that undergraduates were less satisfied than graduate students. And Ebersole (*Going the Distance*, 2006) reports that 70% of students surveyed by the educational research firm Ed Adventures did not believe their online experience to be of the same quality as a traditional class. However, 57% of the academic leaders in the Sloan study (2002) believe that the learning outcomes of online courses are "equal to or superior to" traditional courses; this is particularly true at public institutions.

Concomitantly, not all faculty are perceived to be positive about online courses (Sloan Consortium, 2005). Early on, faculty were concerned over intellectual property rights, compensation practices, and promotion and tenure issues. More recent challenges include authentication, unbundling, and staying abreast of technology. Because of these concerns, faculty have been slow to embrace DE (Bates, 2000; Bower, 2001; Howell, Williams, and Lindsay). Some researchers believe that the opportunity for face-to-face student interaction is one of the primary reasons many faculty choose the profession (Bower). But according to the Sloan report, chief academic officers believe that online education is a critical component of long-term strategy, particularly for education at the post-baccalaureate level. Figure 2 illustrates this point. Furthermore, 82% of these academic leaders believe that it is not any harder to

Figure 2. Online Education as a Long-Term Strategy



evaluate quality of online instruction than classroom instruction (Sloan Consortium, 2005).

Some disciplines, however, such as laboratory science, social work, or public speaking, obviously do not lend themselves as readily to nontraditional teaching forms (Picciano, 2006). And, of course, the age-old argument of the need for class interaction persists, although much of higher education seems to be recognizing that actually a great deal of class interaction can take place in DE courses (Picciano; Geracimos; Miller and Lu). Chat rooms are replacing lecture halls; the internet is replacing the brick-and-mortar campus; and cyberspace is replacing communities (Eaton). Similarly, critics of DE point out a correlation between the growth of online courses and the growth of adjunct faculty (Picciano), a situation generally frowned upon in higher education.

DE is susceptible to change brought about by a variety of factors. Among these factors are advances in technology, modifications in accreditation standards, changes in the market place, shifts in workforce demands, and changes in consumer expectations (Bates; *Going the Distance*). Today, the most common use of DE is to support traditional classroom instruction (Bates). But just as online courses reached a new height with the introduction of class-management software such as Blackboard and WebCT, DE also may reach a new high, or low, depending upon institutions' response to these factors (Bates). Online education appears to be ahead of the curve in "recognizing, adapting and accommodating" to change (*Going the Distance*).

Today, many institutions are vying for student enrollment—traditional colleges and universities, consortia, for-profits, corporate universities, post-secondary schools, and training companies (Wang, 2006). With outsourcing, insourcing, vendor purchases, and institutional swapping, soon it may be hard to distinguish between a traditional campus-based educational experience and DE (Carnevale, January, 2004; Eaton, Bedigian, 2006). But Eaton cautions that even though numerous partnerships are developing in DE, particularly to provide services to support the distance learner, an "unbridgeable gap" still exists between the values of the for-profits and the non-profits.

## **No Significant Difference in Learning Outcomes**

For centuries higher education has assumed the ideal teaching mode to be the teacher and pupil sharing the same space and learning taking place via lecture and dialogue (O'Lawrence). Or as Neil Rudenstine, former president of Harvard, once asserted, "Direct human contact [is] absolutely essential to serious education" (Picciano, p. 75). This belief that the "essence of teaching is the irreplaceable quality of face-to-face interaction" (Sloan Consortium, 2002, p. 3) is slowly

being dispelled. No longer is there an automatic assumption that DE is of lower quality than traditional classroom instruction (University of Idaho 1; Sloan Consortium, 2002; Picciano; Russell, 2001). The government has mandated quality; accrediting agencies have required it; and the public expects it (McKenzie as cited in Wang).

In *The No Significant Difference Phenomenon: A Comparative Research Annotated Bibliography on Technology for Distance Education*, Russell (p. xii) cites hundreds of studies that found there was no “measurable benefit to learning attributable to technology.” He states that the only real benefits from different media can be measured in the cost and convenience of their use. Russell states (p. xiv), “No matter how it is produced, how it is delivered, whether or not it is interactive, low-tech or high-tech, students learn equally well with each technology and learn as well as their on-campus, face-to-face counterparts.” Russell’s review of 355 research studies is impressive.

## **Persistent Controversy**

Although numerous studies have found no significant difference between DE and traditional classroom instruction (Schrum; O’Lawrence; Russell), DE is still controversial within higher education and even among some employers. Frank Mayadas of the Sloan Consortium states this about online courses: “The biggest drawback now is seeing that this is a legitimate form of education, an idea that is [still] not widely accepted.” (Geracimos, pNA). For example, Adams and DeFleur report that 73% of students in their study received tuition remission from their employers for work-related courses. However, 28% of those receiving tuition remission reported that their employer would not pay for online courses (Adams and DeFleur, 2006).

Further, Adams and DeFleur discovered that a job applicant with a bachelor’s degree that was earned online (whole or in part) has less of an employment opportunity than a graduate with a traditional degree. Similarly, their research found that only 7% of public institutions and 11% of private institutions studied would consider an applicant for graduate school who had earned a degree online. This statistic certainly speaks volumes about the perceived quality of online education by institutional gate-keepers.

In another of their research studies, Adams and DeFleur found that academic-search committees are unwilling to entertain applicants with online doctoral degrees. But a survey by the Distance Education and Training Council found that approximately 70% of corporate supervisors believe a DE degree to be “just as valuable or more valuable” than a traditional degree (O’Lawrence). It should be noted that all of the respondents in this study had at least one employee

*“No matter how it is produced, how it is delivered, whether or not it is interactive, low-tech or high-tech, students learn equally well with each technology and learn as well as their on-campus, face-to-face counterparts.”*

*Thomas L. Russell*

who had an online degree, thus suggesting that “familiarity breeds acceptance.” Finally, studies have shown that employers are more accepting of online degrees if the awarding institution is regionally accredited; similarly, employers tend to believe a degree to be more valuable if from a well-known, well-respected school (Mulrean, 2006).

U.S. Congressman Vernon Ehlers from Michigan, a skeptic about online education, has found fault with some of the research supporting the lack of a significant difference between DE and traditional instruction. He refers to a study done by the United States Department of Education as “ridiculous.” Further, he states that the “pedagogical issues, the educational attitude, the educational psychological issues that are different” have not been studied (Foster, 2006, p. A38). Whether his opinion is valid is not the issue; he represents political decision-making on matters relating to DE. He also opposed eliminating the 50% Rule that required institutions receiving federal student aid to teach at least half of their courses in a classroom setting on campus. The 50% Rule was finally eliminated in 2006 as part of the Higher Education Reconciliation Act (Dillion, 2006).

## **Sense of Community**

One issue about which most researchers do agree is that the undergraduate experience cannot be simulated via DE. Adams and DeFleur (p. 42) state, “You can’t replace the classroom experience with a computer.” According to *The Wall Street Journal*, the “atmosphere” for undergraduates is hard to duplicate (Golden). And an article in *Change* (Carriuolo, p. 56) notes: “We should not fool ourselves into thinking that nontraditional undergraduates enrolled in online courses necessarily will enjoy the same type of social and economic success as they might have gained from traditional undergraduate experiences.” Perhaps this is the reason that online education is less important as a long-term strategy for universities offering only undergraduate degrees (Sloan Consortium, 2003; Sloan Consortium, 2005) than for those also offering graduate degrees. And campus-based instruction also may be preferred for students with certain disadvantages, such as learning disabilities (Carriuolo).

The research shows that DE can create a “sense of community,” which we know is conducive to learning (Carriuolo; Miller and Lu; Swan and Shea, 2005), but students will be deprived of, among other things, the physical presence of role models and the lessons that they impart on social norms, behaviors, and even dress. Although students will miss out on some of these aspects of engagement (Zernike), Swan and Shea believe that online courses can be a “community of practice” and that five forms of social support (informational, emotional, esteem, tangible aid, and social network) can be realized through DE.

## **Accreditation and Best Practices**

Because of the rapid growth of DE, particularly online courses, and the need for quality assurance, regional accrediting agencies as well as other groups have undertaken the task of providing guidelines and setting benchmarks. Accreditation agencies have long been the gate-keepers of quality assurance within higher education. For decades, they have adapted to changes in technology and the marketplace while maintaining a standard of excellence grounded in enduring principles and values. Accreditation agencies recognize that education must change to meet the needs of society, and never has this been more evident than with the growth of DE.

To this end, the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC) has stated five components for Best Practices which are designed to assist institutions in planning and evaluating DE:

- Institutional Context and Commitment (consistency of DE with the institution's mission);
- Curriculum and Instruction (appropriate learning outcomes);
- Faculty Support (issues of workload, compensation, and so on);
- Student Support (emphasis on student services);
- Evaluation and Assessment (documentation of outcomes).

These five components (Best Practices p.1) are not new, but rather “explicate how the well-established essentials of institutional quality found in regional accreditation standards are applicable to the emergent forms of learning; much of the detail of their content would find application in any learning environment.”

In addition to the accreditation agencies, several other organizations have developed similar best practices and/or benchmark criteria (Wang, 2006). For example, The Sloan Consortium has listed five “pillars”: learning effectiveness, access, student satisfaction, faculty satisfaction, and cost effectiveness. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) looks at seven fundamental elements: institutional mission, institutional organizational structure, institutional resources, curriculum and instruction, faculty support, student support, and student learning outcomes. And the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) recommends fourteen standards which are somewhat pragmatic in detail, such as class size should be determined by the faculty (Wang).

In offering these formulations, each of these organizations is trying to ensure quality while at the same time responding to the unprecedented challenges and opportunities brought about by DE. Tansey (2006, p. 2) asks, “Will we advance online learning on the basis of ever-improving quality, or simply compete on the basis of the effective marketing of convenience... ?” Those with formal or infor-

*Accreditation agencies recognize that education must change to meet the needs of society, and never has this been more evident than with the growth of DE.*

mal oversight intend to ensure that quality prevails as DE continues to encourage innovation and challenge conventional assumptions of higher learning.

## **Realities for The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi**

An informal survey of several Phi Kappa Phi chapters, conducted by national headquarters staff, found that most chapters believe that they invite DE students to membership (Barro, 2006). In subsequent communications by the author with these and other chapters, it was further determined that some chapters do initiate DE students, some do not, and many do not know if they do or do not. Following is an examination of probable barriers relating to identifying, initiating, and providing services to DE students.

### ***Identifying DE Students***

Perhaps one of the greatest barriers to inviting potential students to membership is identifying DE students within institutional data bases. At some institutions, DE students are handled no differently than campus-based students. For example, at the University of Illinois Online, which currently has twenty-six online degree programs, students are admitted and registered through regular channels (Kriger, 2001). At other institutions such as San Diego State University, the DE program is a different unit, and these students are not in the “main” data base (Wright, 2006).

Do chapter officers know whether DE students are in the data base that they routinely access? If DE students are in a separate data base, do chapter officers know how to acquire this additional data base? And once acquired, how are these names factored into the pool? Are they a part of other academic units, or are DE students considered a separate academic unit within a member institution? For institutions that offer online courses to thousands of students around the world (for example, Troy University), inclusion of these DE students could pose significant management problems for the chapter.

### ***Resistance to Accepting DE Students***

As has been pointed out, most research studies indicate no significant difference in learning measures between DE students and those in the traditional classroom. Yet some faculty remain reluctant to participate in DE, and some students have voiced dissatisfaction with their DE experiences. Could these factors alter a chapter’s vision for reaching DE students? Could there still be a belief that DE students do not represent the same quality of excellence found in traditional students?

## **Initiating DE Students**

When DE students are accustomed to technological communication, is a postal mail invitation easily ignored? Can chapters handle invitations and acceptances online?

Also, anecdotal stories of online students coming to campus for the first time to receive their diplomas do sometimes appear. Would DE students also come to campus for the Phi Kappa Phi initiation? More importantly, should they be expected to? If most DE students are nontraditional and are enrolled because of work and family commitments, it seems unrealistic to expect their attendance at a traditional initiation ceremony. How many chapters require attendance at the initiation ceremony for membership? Are chapters willing to change their rituals to be more inclusive of DE students? Technology offers boundless opportunities for creative initiations, and a cyberspace initiation may be as effective and positive for the DE student as a seated banquet or reception is for the campus-based student.

## **Member Services**

Individual chapters and even Society headquarters face several challenges in making sure that all member services are extended to DE students. These services can be either barriers, or they can become incentives and/or opportunities.

- **Web pages.** Do all chapters have up-to-date and user-friendly Web pages? Web pages are likely to be the first line of contact DE students will seek with Phi Kappa Phi. Do chapters have the means (technology, expertise, staff/officer time) to manage Web pages? Lack of adequate chapter Web pages could prove to be a significant barrier.
- **Chapter affiliation.** In 2005, Clemson University graduated its first online Master in Human Resource Development class (Online HRD graduates, 2006). The entire class was a cohort of employees from Boys & Girls Club International. Assuming that some of these students met the criteria for membership, could there be established a Boys & Girls Club Alumni Chapter of Phi Kappa Phi? What about corporate alumni chapters? Or chapters on military bases? Initiating DE students may afford Phi Kappa Phi the opportunity to establish new kinds of chapters and thus serve all members better.
- **Awards and recognition.** Phi Kappa Phi offers more than \$700,000 in awards and scholarships each year as well as additional funding for special projects such as literacy outreach. Are any of these awards specifically directed to DE students? Should they be? Do the application procedures inadvertently discriminate against the DE student?

- **Webinars.** Several years ago, Phi Kappa Phi began offering Web-based seminars that address educational as well as professional needs? Could Phi Kappa Phi partner with institutions so that these seminars carry academic credit? Should Phi Kappa Phi initiate this dialogue, or should the impetus come from chapter officers who work with faculty to incorporate the Webinars into a course? Should Webinars be accessible only for members, or should this be a service that Phi Kappa Phi performs for the academic community?

## **Summary and Conclusions**

DE has brought about a new “look, feel and style” to higher education in the United States and abroad (Picciano). DE has begun to dramatically change the way education is perceived and delivered as well as planned for the future. With the onset of the internet culture and online courses, higher education continues to grow, expand, and challenge every entrenched principle of the academy. DE has changed students, faculty, curricula, classrooms and even politics.

The twenty-first-century student is very different from the student of Marcus Urann’s generation and thus must be served differently. (Marcus Urann was a student at the University of Maine in the late 1800s and is considered the founder of Phi Kappa Phi.) For example, the student of today:

- Is, or will most likely be, a knowledge-based worker who is seeking convenience, flexibility, quality, and affordability in higher education (Zernike);
- Is a “digital whiz” and is accustomed to immediate response through high-speed technology;
- Lacks brand loyalty and will go wherever he or she needs to get whatever is desired;
- Is more likely to be employed and to have additional commitments and obligations far beyond a college setting;
- Is being courted by slick advertisements from corporate universities, freestanding online institutions, training centers, and even traditional colleges and universities, all promising a bright and successful future.

Is it any wonder that traditional institutions are struggling to meet the needs of today’s student?

DE is on the rise precisely because it does meet those needs: it is convenient, flexible, relevant, and reasonably affordable. Most important, current research confirms no significant difference in learning outcomes between DE and on-campus courses. Whether a DE degree is as marketable as an on-campus degree

is still questionable. However, time and experience may well demonstrate that it is.

Honor societies in general serve a twofold purpose for an individual: recognition and encouragement of scholarship (Mitsifer, 1986). They can also provide a sense of community. The primary objectives of Phi Kappa Phi as stated in the bylaws are to promote excellence, recognize achievement, and encourage service to others. Are these objectives inconsistent with DE?

The College Honor Societies Standards and Guidelines (2005, p. 8) states that “institutions must recognize the needs of students who participate in distance learning for access to programs and services offered on campus. Institutions must provide appropriate services in ways that are accessible to distance learners... .” Many institutions cite their greatest challenge to educating the DE student as providing adequate services (Picciano; Carnevale, July 2004; Wang; Galusha). Would it be any different for Phi Kappa Phi? Picciano says that online courses have posed a number of logistical problems for institutions, including admissions, access to libraries, financial aid, tutoring, and advising. And Hardy states, “distance-education students [complain] that they are required to pay for campus services that they don’t use” (Carnevale, July 30, p. A22). These services no doubt include student athletic events, health services, cultural events, and campus parking.

A very thorough review of the literature coupled with a query to the Association of College Honor Societies found no other honor society addressing the challenges of DE; thus, Phi Kappa Phi has the opportunity to lead the academy in this regard. Through a consistent effort at initiating the DE students at our institutions, Phi Kappa Phi might realize new opportunities for service, a larger membership, more cost-effective operations, and possible lifelong and loyal connections to members. The obvious challenge is to maintain commitment to Phi Kappa Phi’s standards of excellence, principles, and values while reaching the DE student. Miller and Lu (p. 168) state that DE needs “leaders of great skill, faculty of great concern, and a community committed to change.” The same can be said for Phi Kappa Phi if we are to thrive in this new educational environment.

The research is conclusive: there is no significant difference in learning outcomes between DE students and traditional students. There is also no difference between the capacity of DE students and traditional students to meet the objectives of Phi Kappa Phi. Therefore, there should be no difference in Phi Kappa Phi’s willingness to initiate DE versus traditional students. The differences come in the way the students are identified, initiated, and served. These are the challenges facing Phi Kappa Phi chapters.

*Phi Kappa Phi has the opportunity to lead the academy . . . in this new educational environment.*

*Distance learning is the outcome of distance education.*

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## **Appendix: Action Steps for Chapters**

Phi Kappa Phi encourages its chapters to consider eligible distance education students for membership in Phi Kappa Phi.

To that end, as a member of your chapter's leadership you should:

1. Review your by-laws to determine if there is language that would deter the consideration of distance-education students. Take steps to revise your by-laws as needed, and ensure that eligibility requirements (including the "sound character" requirement) are met as you do so.
2. Ask your Registrar to include distance-education and/or off-campus students as s/he prepares the list of students eligible for invitation to Phi Kappa Phi membership.
3. Consider changes in your initiation process as needed to more fully include distance-education students (for instance, nomination procedures, recommendation processes, and so on).
4. Revise invitation materials as needed so that Phi Kappa Phi membership becomes a viable possibility for distance-education students.
5. Determine whether an alternate initiation ceremony should be developed for distance-education students.
6. Establish and/or update your chapter's Web site; for most distance-education students, this medium may be their first point of contact with the chapter.
7. Consider ways that Phi Kappa Phi members who were distance-education students can support your chapter and stay involved.





*Let the Love of Learning  
Rule Humanity.*

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