

# Digital Diplomas

Welcome to the brave new world  
of higher education, where  
professors are **"content experts,"**  
classes are **"courseware,"**  
and students are **customers.**  
But just what is a dot-com degree worth?

LAST MARCH, ARTHUR LEVINE, the president of Columbia University's Teachers College, predicted in a *New York Times* op-ed article that information technology may soon make the traditional brick-and-mortar university obsolete. With schools facing growing pressure to reduce costs and with students increasingly demanding the convenience and flexibility associated with "a utility company, supermarket, or bank," Levine pointed to online education—the delivery of courses, even full-fledged degrees, via the Internet—as a natural solution.

"It is possible right now for a professor to give a lecture in Cairo, for me to attend that lecture at Teachers College, and for another student to attend it in Tokyo," explained Levine. "If we can do all of that, and the demographics of higher education are changing so greatly, why do we need the physical plant called the college?"

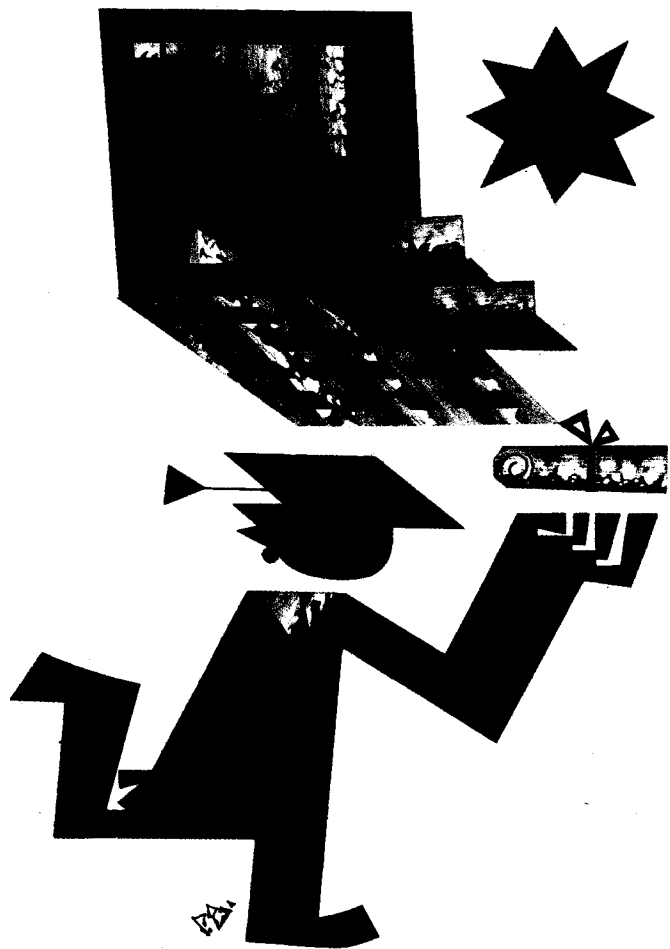
Levine is hardly alone in believing that online education will radically transform—if not altogether displace—traditional universities. In recent years, academic institutions and a growing number of Internet companies have been racing to tap into the booming market in virtual learning, which financial analysts like Merrill Lynch estimate will reach \$7 billion by 2003.

By Eyal Press & Jennifer Washburn

Already, more than half of the nation's colleges and universities deliver some courses over the Internet. Dozens of schools, including large, well-known universities like Seton Hall and the University of Colorado, offer bachelor's and master's degrees entirely online via a virtual education company called eCollege. Many more have chosen not to grant degrees under their own names, but instead to license their courses and "brands" to Internet companies. Harvard and Duke provide "courseware" to the Silicon Valley-based company Pensare. Columbia, Stanford, the University of Chicago, and several other elite schools have signed marketing agreements with UNext.com, an Internet firm bankrolled in part by former junk-bond trader Michael Milken.

What excites online entrepreneurs is the prospect of turning college courses into prepackaged "content" that can be marketed and sold—for a profit—over the Internet. Instead of attending classes, students simply go to a Web site, click on a digital recording of the professor's lecture, and download the day's assignment. Gone, the technology's promoters

PHOTOGRAPH BY FREDRIK BRODÉN • ILLUSTRATIONS BY PHILIP ANDERSON



promise, is the need to build expensive campus facilities; millions of students can access a top-flight education, from anywhere in the world, via their Internet browser.

It's an enthralling idea, yet a troubling one. While most educators support using technology to broaden educational opportunities, a growing number fear that commercial rather than pedagogical considerations are driving the distance-learning trend. "Universities should be asking: How can this new technology enhance the quality of learning?" says Risa Lieberwitz, a professor of labor law at Cornell University. "Instead, the question seems to be: How can this technology generate profit?" Cornell recently launched its own for-profit subsidiary to market courses on the Internet (Temple and New York University have done the same), a decision that aroused strong opposition among professors.

Many educators fear that universities are rushing to cash in on the online craze before they learn much about it. While using the Internet to transfer information is easy enough, little is known about the actual quality of the online education experience; it's unclear, for example, how students will fare as face-to-face conversations with professors and peers, and the personal and professional relationships often forged on campus,

are replaced by virtual communication. Far from democratizing education, many critics argue, online learning could facilitate the rise of a two-tiered educational system—prestigious campus-based diplomas for the children of elites, mass-marketed online degrees for those less fortunate.

What's more, virtual education threatens to shift control over the learning process from college educators to administrators and marketers, many of whom advocate using the Internet to tailor

education more closely to the needs of industry. It's a vision that appeals to commercial interests, but one that also risks blurring the line between higher education and business as never before.

**I**nvesting in technology rather than bricks and mortar is also serving as a convenient rallying cry for government officials reluctant to commit resources to public education. Anticipating a boost in demand for postsecondary degrees, but loath to raise taxes to pay for it, many have already embraced distance learning as a way to expand on the cheap. "Just building campuses is a very expensive proposition," Jeffery Livingston, associate commissioner for the Utah System of Higher Education, told reporters in 1996. "Governors see [online education] as a way to not spend as much money in the future to meet growth."

In 1997, facing a projected 50 percent increase in the state's student population over the next decade, Utah governor Mike Leavitt announced the formation of Western Governors University, a cyber-college backed by governors from 19 states that now offers online courses from 40 schools. "We are turning around the old notion that to be educated one had to go somewhere," Leavitt declared in a speech before the U.S. Senate's Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee. "We are going to bring the knowledge and information to the learner," providing students with a high-quality education "while holding costs in check."

By January 2000, Western Governors University had enrolled a mere 200 degree-seeking students. But the unimpressive numbers have not dampened the enthusiasm of higher education officials in other states. In 1998, after Washington governor Gary Locke appointed a commission of business and community leaders to create a blueprint for the future of higher learning, Wallace Loh, his top postsecondary education adviser, delivered a speech extolling the "brave new world of digital education." Using technology to create a "virtual university," Loh announced, would help hold down costs while accommodating the estimated 80,000 new students projected to enter the state's higher education system over the next two decades.

Despite what politicians may hope, however, there is little evidence that distance learning will save taxpayers money—at least if quality is to be maintained. A recent University of Illinois study found that "high quality online teaching is time- and labor-intensive" and is therefore "not likely to be the income source envisioned by some administrators." Because professors find conducting virtual discussion groups and responding to student emails enormously time-consuming, "teaching students online at the same level of quality as in the classroom requires more time and money," the study concluded, not less.

Beyond the dubious assumption that distance education will lower

expenditures lie important questions about the nature of teaching and learning. At the University of Washington, more than 850 faculty members responded to Governor Locke's distance-learning initiative by signing an open letter that decried "visions of education 'without bricks and mortar.'" Noting that Washington ranked in the bottom half among states in higher education spending, the letter argued that before diverting public funds "from 'live' education into techno-substitutes," officials should consider that learning cannot be reduced to "the downloading of information, much less to the passive and solitary activity of staring at a screen."

Faculty members were not rejecting technology, says University of Washington professor of education Theodore Kaltsounis, but rather arguing against its misuse. "We feel very strongly that you cannot have a university without interaction between faculty and students," he says. "Technology may facilitate that interaction, but it is not a substitute for it."

Nicholas Burbules, a professor of education at the University of Illinois who has used the Internet in his own teaching, echoes this concern. "The most frequently used term is that this is a new delivery system," explains Burbules. "But that is a poor and very narrow description of teaching. It fits the lecture and textbook models, but for most people the enduring aspects of higher education are writing skills, critical-thinking skills, learning to learn. Can seminars, critical dialogues, active inquiry become part of online media? None of those things can be understood on a 'delivery system' model."

Which is not to say, Burbules adds, that online learning cannot be used effectively. "The technology has great potential," he notes. "And we are beginning to see a student clientele that is more and more receptive to the distance-education model. You can take courses

on your own schedule, you can do it on your own time—all of that has tremendous appeal to students who are older, students with jobs and families."

**b**ut while some students may prefer the convenience of online courses, there is also a danger that distance learning could split higher education into "brick universities" that provide traditional degrees for those who can afford them, and "click universities" that offer a form of glorified vocational training for everyone else. Already, the majority of college students juggle course work, a job, and, in many cases, a family; according to the National Center for Education Statistics, fewer than half of the 12 million undergraduates enrolled in U.S. universities fit the mold of the "traditional" student who takes courses full time and completes a degree before age 24.

"I see this as a class issue," says Carole Fungaroli, a professor of English at Georgetown University and the author of *Traditional Degrees for Nontraditional Students*, a book that argues that even adults with families and careers can and should pursue on-campus education. "Who is going to end up in these distance-learning courses? Single moms, working parents—the very people who most desperately need social contact as part of their educational experience." When Fungaroli interviewed students enrolled in online courses at various universities, she discovered that "most of the students I talked to were extremely discouraged by the isolation."

Teresa Ebert and Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, professors of English in the State University of New York system, sound a similar warning. In a recent *Los Angeles Times* op-ed article, they suggest that in the future, traditional colleges will train a select group of students in critical thinking and problem solving, "while mass universities will deploy distance learning to deliver low-cost content...necessary to turn working-class students into performers for low- and mid-level jobs in the global economy."

Even Levine of Columbia—who likens online learning to the GI Bill in its potential to "extend the reach of American higher education"—admits to similar worries. "My big fear," he says, "is that we will provide personal, highly interactive campuses for those who can afford them, and the rest will be given virtual higher education."

The pros and cons of this digital divide are quickly emerging at New School University (formerly known as the New School for Social Research) in New York City, which boasts one of the fastest-growing online departments in the country. Launched in 1994, the program now offers almost 400 courses to approximately 1,300 students each term, with enrollment increasing by 40 percent a year.

Many of the courses are surprisingly basic in design. In an upper-division course on Victorian literature, for example, the syllabus lists readings from Dickens to Tennyson. Several times each week a professor posts questions based on the current assignment and students reply via email. Students also write two term papers and take a final exam—all submitted and graded online.

Michelle Ciarrocca, a 27-year-old researcher who has

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taken several online courses at the New School, says completing an Internet-based class requires tremendous self-motivation. "If you are a very disciplined person and it is your only option, it can be a good one," she says. "The downside is that if students are not motivated, it is very easy not to do the work." Ciarrocca, who holds a full-time job, says she valued the ability to "come home at midnight, log on, and start working on a course." But, she adds, "I don't think I'd want my whole college education to be that way. I just think you need some person-to-person contact in your education."

Indeed, the New School has felt compelled to create a digital facsimile of campus life for its online students. Participants in Internet-based courses have access to a virtual student center called Bar Six,

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where they can post messages and chat online. The center, it turns out, is named after an actual café in Manhattan where students can meet in person, if they happen to be in New York City.

For the New School, online learning has served as a logical extension of a curriculum focused on evening and weekend courses for working professionals. But proponents say interactive software also may soon replace most of the introductory lectures at traditional universities, especially at large schools where a substantial portion of teaching has already been turned over to graduate students.

"Lecturing was always a very silly system," contends Roger Schank, founder of the distance-learning firm Cognitive Arts. "But it works economically for universities, so they don't want to change it." Schank notes that Cognitive Arts is working with Columbia to create complex programs (costing as much as \$1 million each to develop) that challenge students to tackle real-world problems: Students in an economics class, for example, may engage in an online simulation of a crisis in a developing country.

But Schank acknowledges that many existing online classes are little more than lecture courses translated to the Internet. And once a course is placed on the Web, the responsibility for teaching it can be farmed out to just about anyone—a matter that has begun to attract notice among faculty.

"Our concern is that professors' intellectual work may be taken from them and controlled by management," explains Barbara Bowen, head of the faculty union at the City University of New York. Administrators could pay professors a flat fee to design courses, she notes, then hire low-paid part-timers to administer online discussions and grading.

Such concerns have made intellectual property—the question of who owns the rights to online "courseware"—one of the most hotly contested issues on campuses these days. Traditionally, teachers have been considered the owners of lectures and course materials. But the market potential of online education has led numerous schools to attempt to claim these rights, prompting protests from faculty organizations, including the American Association of University Professors.

In one controversial case, the extension program at the University of California-Los Angeles in 1994 signed a contract that allowed an outside vendor, OnlineLearning.net, to create and copyright online versions of UCLA courses. The contract was amended in 1999 to affirm professors' rights to the basic content of their courses.

But Ed Condren, a UCLA professor who is critical of the agreement, points out that even under the amended contract, OnlineLearning retains the right to market and distribute those courses online, which is the crux of the copyright dispute.

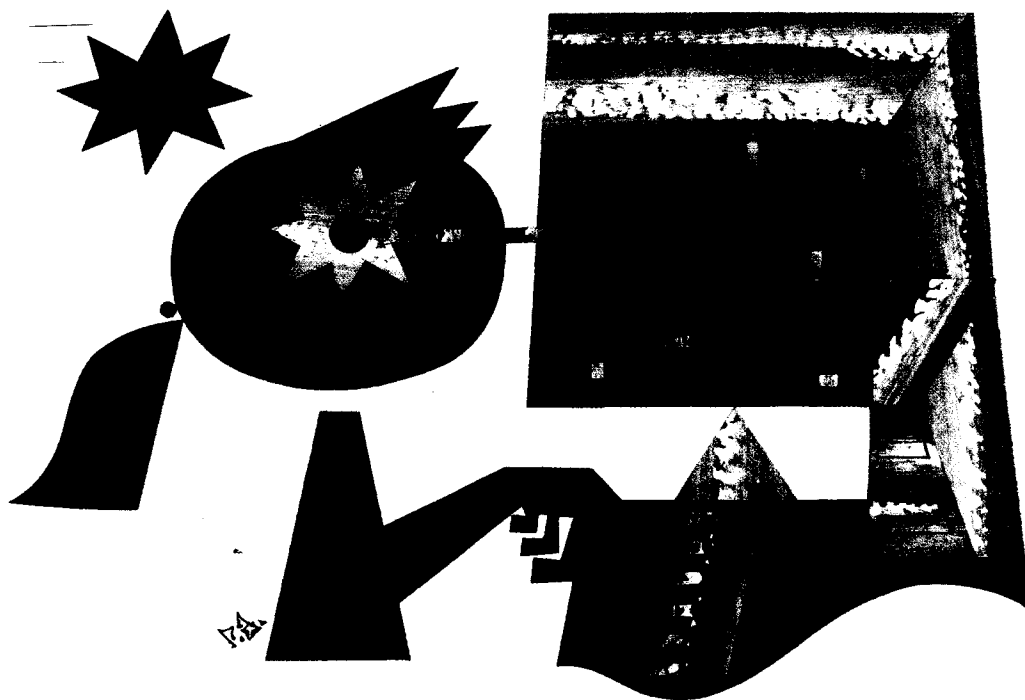
For faculty members, says Condren, the debate over intellectual property rights is really about academic freedom. If universities can lay claim to the content of a professor's lecture notes, syllabus, or textbook, he maintains, "it would undermine the legal protection that enables faculty to freely express their views without fear of censorship or appropriation of their ideas."

It might also radically diminish professors' job security. In a recent paper prepared under the auspices of Educause—a consortium of 1,700 universities and more than 170 corporations that seeks to enhance academic "productivity"—education scholars William Massy and Robert Zemsky argue that universities must use technology to trim teaching expenditures. "With labor accounting for 70 percent or more of current operating cost," they assert, "there is simply no other way."

In a 1998 report entitled "The Transformation of Higher Education in the Digital Age," the Wall Street consulting firm Coopers and Lybrand went further, noting that technology can eliminate two significant cost factors. "The first is the need for bricks and mortar; traditional campuses are not necessary. The second is full-time faculty. [Online] learning involves only a small number of professors, but has the potential to reach a huge market of students."

Leading players in the for-profit online education busi-

**"Behind all of this technology," says City University of New York professor Barbara Bowen, "there is a very real concern about a seismic shift in the control and direction of the university—from people who have spent their lives teaching, to managers who are under pressure to decrease costs."**



ness already rely extensively on part-timers. The online branch of the University of Phoenix—a for-profit school often cited by academics as a major competitor to traditional colleges—employs no full-time professors but uses more than 1,400 “practitioner faculty,” who are not eligible for tenure or benefits. At Florida Gulf Coast University, a new public college that does not offer tenure and has enrolled one-quarter of its students in online courses, Dean of Instructional Technology Kathleen Davey hopes to boost participation in virtual learning by hiring “additional instructional staff—whether grad students or people with a master’s in the community—[to] take some of the load off correspondence and grading.”

**b**ut the growth of online learning threatens to change far more than the quality and size of a school’s faculty. “Behind all of this technology,” says Bowen at the City University of New York, “there is a very real concern about a seismic shift in the control and direction of the university—from people who have spent their lives teaching, to managers who are under pressure to decrease costs.”

What worries many critics is the trend toward a “consumer-oriented,” more corporate-friendly model of higher education. Consider the vision laid out in “The Virtual University,” a report that grew out of a joint Educause/IBM roundtable held in 1998. By 2007, it states, “a model of mass customization” will replace the system in which professors alone decide what goes into a course and how it is taught.

The report envisions academic programs created “through a continuous process of market research” with “input from business and industry.” Consumers, it predicts, will shop for online courses tailored to their job and career goals; the role of professors will be “disag-

gregated” as instructors “move from being content experts to being a combination of content expert, learning-process design expert, and process-implementation manager.”

Columbia’s Levine outlines a similar vision. The traditional degree, he suggested in a recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, may soon be supplanted by an “educational passport” cataloging “the specific information that the student knows or the skills that he or she can perform.” Those skills, he added, could be taught by any number of institutions: “Why should a credential from Microsoft University...be less prestigious than one from a regional state college?” Schools that fail to adapt to the market’s need for “lifelong learning” and high-tech convenience, Levine

warns, could find themselves beaten out by for-profit competitors, much as traditional booksellers were overtaken by Amazon.com.

Yet the business leaders whose needs are so often cited by promoters of online education seem far less certain about the quality of virtual degrees: A study conducted last October by Vault.com, an online firm that offers information on companies to job seekers, found that 77 percent of the human-resources officers it surveyed did not consider a degree from an online-only institution to be equivalent to a campus-based diploma, and more than 60 percent said they were concerned that students in online courses lacked social interaction with peers. “Some employers feel like students are getting a degree-lite or a watered-down degree,” Vault co-founder Mark Oldman told the *New York Times*.

To David Noble, a historian at York University in Toronto and co-founder of an advocacy group called the National Coalition for Universities in the Public Interest, the rush to online education is eerily reminiscent of an earlier distance-learning experiment. In a recent article distributed widely on the Internet—the latest in a series he has written under the title “Digital Diploma Mills”—Noble notes that at the turn of the century, the same fervor now shown for online education was bestowed on correspondence courses delivered through the mail. William Rainey Harper, a distance-education pioneer who would go on to serve as president of the University of Chicago, predicted in 1885 that “the day is coming when the work done by correspondence will be greater in amount than that done in the classrooms of our academies and colleges.” As of 1919, more than 70 universities [continued on page 82]

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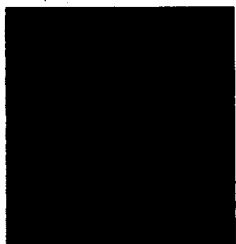
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### digital diplomas

[continued from page 39] had launched correspondence programs, entering into competition with a legion of companies that, by the mid-1920s, operated 300 for-profit correspondence schools with a combined income of more than \$70 million.

Much like the promoters of online learning, correspondence schools emphasized the benefits of learning in the comfort of one's home, at one's own pace. Yet, Noble shows, while universities initially promised that courses would be taught by regular professors, they soon resorted to an assortment of poorly paid "readers" and associate instructors in order to offset rising administrative costs. Schools like Columbia and the University of California, Berkeley, experienced dropout rates from their correspondence programs of 70 to 80 percent, and critics began to assail the practice of inducing students to enroll under a no-refund policy while providing shoddy instruction in return. "The whole thing is business, not education," wrote the distinguished scholar Abraham Flexner in a scathing 1930 critique that marked the beginning of the correspondence movement's demise.

The primary impact of online learning, Noble warns, will be an ever greater blending of academic and commercial interests. During the last two decades, he argues, universities' research priorities have shifted to accommodate the needs of business, and the same process now is underway with regard to teaching. Both times, he says, the push toward commercialization has come from outside the university—first from "industrial corporations seeking indirect public subsidy of their research needs," and now from "private vendors of instructional hardware, software, and content looking for subsidized product development and a potentially lucrative market."

The commercial forces Noble describes were on striking display at the Interactive Knowledge Forum, a conference on distance learning held last fall at Columbia University. Co-sponsored by the Internet consulting company Jupiter Research and Fathom, an online education firm whose investors include Columbia, the event attracted representatives from a host of com-

panies that are banking on the Internet to revolutionize education—and generate windfall profits—in the years to come. (In fact, not all analysts are so sanguine: Many online education companies, like other dot-coms, have recently had difficulty attracting investors, who are beginning to wonder whether these firms can actually deliver a quality product.)

In language more reminiscent of Wall Street than the academic world, panelists at the forum debated topics like "The Business of Education: Growing Minds and Bottom

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Lines." An analyst from Jupiter Research presented charts on "Paid Content, Licensing, and Syndication" and the latest trends in online advertising. Afterward, Fathom CEO Ann Kirschner explained that her experience launching the Web site for the National Football League had provided her with a model for the online higher education business. "What I learned is that you could take an important brand and use a new technology to extend its range," she said; like sports franchises, she added, universities "need to extend their resources in as many quality ways as they can."

Notably absent at the conference was any discussion of whether it is appropriate for universities to market themselves as brands. Nor did a single panelist raise questions about the conflicts of interest that can arise in joint ventures between nonprofit, tax-exempt educational institutions and for-profit Internet firms.

Highlighting that danger is the agreement the University of Chicago has signed with UNext.com. (UNext is among the ventures of Michael Milken, who turned to the online-learning business after serving a prison term for securities fraud in the early 1990s.) Though details of the contract have not been disclosed, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported in 1999 that UNext offers its partner schools an estimated \$20 million in royalties over five to

eight years—plus the option to convert those royalties into shares in an initial public offering—in exchange for the right to use the schools' names in marketing jointly developed online courses.

The agreement has sparked controversy in part, the *Chronicle* noted, because Andrew Rosenfield, the head of UNext and a close friend of Milken's, happens to be a member of the University of Chicago's Board of Trustees, which approved the deal. Daniel Fischel, dean of the University of Chicago Law School, has also invested in UNext, as have two Nobel Prize-winning economists at the school.

Such ties have prompted some professors to question whether decisions will be made in the best interest of the university, or of UNext's shareholders. "We should not be setting up an incentive system that will tempt us in the wrong directions," Richard Shweder, a professor of human development, wrote to the academic committee reviewing the agreement. "I don't think it is healthy for members of our board (even when they are 'good guys' who love the university) to personally profit from their appointment as trustees of our intellectual heritage."

One of the dangers, according to critics, is that universities will diminish their reputations by lending their imprimatur to what remains an essentially untested commercial product. When customers enroll in one of UNext's "University of Chicago" courses, will the quality be comparable to classes taught on campus—or might people come to associate the university with a second-rate product more akin to the correspondence courses of an earlier era?

But universities rushing to embrace dot-com education may risk more than the potential dilution of their "brand." As former Harvard president Derek Bok once warned, when academic institutions grow too closely involved in commercial activities, "they appear less and less as charitable institutions seeking truth and serving students, and more and more as huge commercial operations that differ from corporations only because there are no shareholders and no dividends." Many universities seem to fear that if they don't keep pace with the distance-learning revolution, they will fall behind the times. There is an equal danger, however, that in rushing to profit from the business of online education, they could undermine the case for their own existence. ■

## silence in the fields

[continued from page 47] then I'll go with my family; they're far away, in California. I don't know if they fire me, how I'll be able to get there, but I have to do it. I'm not afraid of that anymore."

But he doesn't call the association. Instead, unable to tolerate his situation any longer, Madrigal bolts. He and his brother-in-law flee the camp a few days after the church service, and a rumor spreads that they've found work in another Southern state. His co-workers take the escapes in stride; Madrigal and his relative are not the first to run away. Nor does his employer seem disturbed. "He just asks the association for two more," says Javier Ortiz, who worked alongside Madrigal. "I don't think it causes him much trouble. He requests however many extra people he needs."

Madrigal is hardly alone. Although Congress approved the H-2A program on the premise that it would reduce the need for undocumented workers, government officials openly acknowledge that the program has actually created a new conduit for illegal immigration. State reports show that growers sometimes ship in more workers than they need, and no one keeps track of how many workers return when the season ends. Billy Green, who monitors the H-2A program for the North Carolina Employment Security Commission, alerted the feds in 1998 that the 10,000 workers imported by growers were four times as many as required. "On the ground, you need 2,500," Green wrote in a memo to the Labor Department. "The others are bogus."

With plenty of extra labor on hand, the harvest never slows—no matter how many workers abandon their jobs. According to officials in North Carolina, the Growers Association reported that 4,164 workers didn't complete the 1999 season—suggesting an AWOL rate of 40 percent. (Eury, the association president, insists the report counts duplicate names and transfers between farms, but refuses to say exactly how many.) In private, many regulators use strong language to denounce the lack of accountability; one internal state memo refers to the association as "the largest alien smuggling ring in this nation's history."

While H-2A workers flee, growers continue to turn away U.S. farmworkers. Bland Farms, the nation's largest Vidalia onion grower, insists that no domestic workers

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