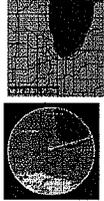




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EIU borrowing to make up for overdue state money

June 22, 2010 11:00 AM | No Comments

CHARLESTON -- Eastern Illinois University will borrow up to \$7 million to tide the school over while it awaits long-overdue money from the state.

EIU trustees on Monday said they were reluctant to borrow. But school President Bill Perry says the university will need the money to cover expenses in August as it waits for \$19 million in state appropriations.

The state is hundreds of millions of dollars behind in sending appropriated money to universities, state agencies and other institutions. The state says it can't afford to make the payments while it wrestles with a \$13 billion budget deficit.

The governor recently signed a new law that allows universities to get short-term loans to cover what the state isn't now paying for.

-- Associated Press

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The New Health Dialogue

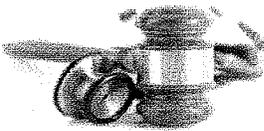
A Blog from New America's Health Policy Program

HEALTH CARE: Hospitals -- and Courts -- Seek Fresh Approaches to Malpractice and Patient Safety

Author(s): Joanne Kenen

Published: June 21, 2010

Issues: Malpractice Medical Errors Quality Health Policy



The grants that President Obama authorized for new approaches to malpractice and patient safety -- including variants of the "disclose and apologize" model -- were awarded earlier this month. (See the full list here). One of the grantees was the **University of Illinois** team we wrote about both on the blog and for Miller-McCune magazine. Dr. Tim McDonald helped us understand some of the technical and legal barriers to moving toward an early disclosure system. It's a lot easier in an academic medical center where the doctors, nurses, hospital are all covered under the same malpractice policy, it's far more difficult in community settings where the doctors aren't hospital employees and a half dozen insurers with different economic interests and philosophies can be involved in a single case. We also came to understand it's

not just the "apology" that matters, it is the commitment to identifying, analyzing and most importantly fixing problems that can lead to patient harm. The Illinois project attempts to go to the heart of this problem, taking the model from the university into community hospitals.

A couple of the grantees look at perinatal patient safety -- right before and after childbirth, a high risk for malpractice suits. One looks at malpractice in the outpatient setting.

One of the grantees, New York Judge Douglas McKeon was profiled by the AP's Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar. Judge McKeon has educated himself on medical practice -- and medical malpractice -- and developed a curriculum for other judges. He created what he calls "judge-directed negotiation." He is now bringing five NY hospitals into a pilot program building on the early disclosure model. He does a mix of negotiation, and a variant of a "health court" (where specially trained judges preside...read more here and here). Patients and families always have the option of going to a standard jury trial.

The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality also awarded 13 smaller planning grants to health systems working on ways of reducing medical injuries and improving safety. Some are focusing on how to create "safe harbors" so that doctors who really do act according to clinically-valid, evidence-based guidelines can have liability protection if something goes wrong, even if they do practice good medicine. Others are working on "shared decision-making" between patients and doctors.



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Attorney general backlogged on FOIA rulings

By **BRUCE RUSHTON** (bruce.rushton@sj-r.com)

THE STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER

Posted Jun 21, 2010 @ 11:30 PM

Nearly 600 cases have piled up at the Illinois attorney general's office from governments and people who want rulings on whether public bodies must release records under the state Freedom of Information Act.

As of June 3, 237 requests from governmental entities that wish to withhold records had been pending for at least 30 days. The attorney general's staff hasn't resolved 354 cases from requesters seeking government records that are more than 30 days old. Some of the cases have been pending since January, when revisions to the law gave the attorney general authority to settle disputes over public records.

"Wow," said Roger Huebner, general counsel for the Illinois Municipal League, whose members are required to respond to records requests within five business days. "Clearly, we have to re-think some of the revisions to this, quote, FOIA rewrite."

Cara Smith, public access counselor for attorney general Lisa Madigan, said the attorney general has received nearly 2,100 cases and closed nearly 1,500, which works out to a closure rate of 72 percent. The public access counselor's office, which handles FOIA matters, has seven full-time lawyers and three who handle other duties in addition to FOIA cases, Smith said. There are plans to hire two additional attorneys.

"There's a tremendous volume," Smith said. "We're doing our absolute best to work through them as quickly as we can

The unresolved cases run the gamut. Some are from lawyers seeking police reports, others from entrepreneurs who want real-estate records, still others from citizens seeking information on public spending and even more from inmates who want forensic lab reports on cases that sent them to prison. Included are:

*A February request from the trustee of a village near Chicago who wants invoices on ambulance services provided by the village that he says have been improperly withheld.

*A request from the **University of Illinois Springfield** to withhold records showing what conduct resulted in the resignation of athletic coaches last year. The request, the result of a FOIA request from The State Journal-Register, has been pending since Jan. 19. In another case, the newspaper in March asked for the attorney general's help after the Department of Central Management Services refused to release records of state leases. That request remains pending.

*A March 11 request for help from a Galesburg radio station that was denied reports on a police officer arrested on suspicion of theft. Smith said the public access counselor's office requested additional information from the police department and is reviewing documents received Wednesday.

*A request from the Jacksonville Police Department to deny a records request from Human Rights Watch, which wants data on rape kits dating back to 1995 to determine how many rape kits have gone untested in Illinois. The kits are used to gather evidence from victims. Human Rights Watch asked for the records a year ago, and the police department referred the case to the attorney general in late March.

Dan Beard, Jacksonville city attorney, said the city called the attorney general because the request would take weeks to fulfill.

"We can't punch a button on a computer and come up with a list of the information that they want," Beard said. "We'd like to cooperate if at all possible with this. Certainly, it can't be completed in the (five-day) time frame in the act."

One gives up

At least one requester says he's given up on the attorney general.

Paul Tomasik, a village trustee of Thornton near Chicago, says he may sue on his own after failing to get information on village ambulance billings.

Not everyone is paying their ambulance bills, and Thornton says he believes that the village may be treating residents differently than non-residents. When he asked for invoices to determine who was paying, who was not and where they lived, the village told him the records were in the hands of a private billing company that could not break the invoices down by ZIP code.

That's ridiculous, says Tomasik, who first asked the attorney general for help on Feb. 25. He's still waiting for the records.

"I can easily extract the data I requested if I am provided with a copy of the ... invoice database," Tomasik, a software consultant himself, wrote in an April 29 letter to the attorney general's office.

Tomasik also offered to travel to the billing company's office to review paper copies of invoices. He said he has received no answer to his letter.

Smith said the attorney general should be able to help find a solution.

"Of course we can be of assistance," Smith said. "Are we doing it fast enough for requesters? I'm sure, not yet. I know, absent our existence, every one of these (requests for help from requesters) is a denial (of records)."

Tomasik attended a FOIA seminar set up by the attorney general's office, and he can rattle off the names of assistant attorneys generals assigned to the public access counselor's office. He says he's losing hope.

"It's a no-brainer: I want to see invoices," Tomasik said in an interview. "I called them (the attorney general) about two weeks ago and they didn't return the call. I don't know why, other than a backlog, I didn't get a better response from the attorney general."

"If it can't work in a village with 2,500 people, where can it work?"

Debra Piszczewski, the Thornton FOIA officer who is responsible for processing records requests, sounds as frustrated as Tomasiak.

"I hate it," Piszczewski said. "We've had 61 FOIAs so far this year. That's more than we've had in total the last three years. Ninety percent of them are from two individuals, one being Paul."

Growing pains

Advocates on opposite sides of FOIA reform agree on one thing: When the attorney general last year crafted the bill that gave the public access counselor the power to referee FOIA disputes, the prospect of huge caseloads was discussed.

"We expressed our concerns to the attorney general that there was going to be a boatload of work in the public access counselor's office," said Don Craven, attorney for the Illinois Press Association. "And, obviously, one of the concerns that advocates of open government have long had is the timeliness."

Huebner said the municipal league, which opposed the FOIA revisions, was skeptical when Madigan's staff said they could handle the workload.

"We said, 'Are you sure you're prepared to do this?'" Huebner recalls. "They assured us they were, and we really did not believe them."

Smith said the cases under review by her office can be complex, and there are no guiding precedents, she said.

"There are going to be growing pains," Smith said. "It's my expectation and belief the turnaround time will decrease. We're talking about a state where people couldn't spell FOIA if you spotted them everything but the 'F.'"

"Give me more than six months to teach them that lesson."

Bruce Rushton can be reached at 788-1542.

FOIA requests bedevil communities large and small

The state Freedom of Information Act gives the attorney general the power to settle disputes over public records, but governments large and small have rejected rulings from Lisa Madigan's office.

In Cook County, the attorney general on June 4 ruled that the autopsy report on Christopher Kelly, former fundraiser for former Gov. Rod Blagojevich, is a public record except for photographs and must be released to the media.

But the county has not turned over the records and has no plans to do so unless ordered by a court.

Richard Velazquez, special counsel to the president of the Cook County Board, said the county plans litigation, which is allowed under the law when public bodies disagree with the attorney general's decisions on FOIA cases.

"This determination has the potential of setting precedent," he said. "Given the county's concerns with the determination, we've decided to seek administrative review."

Local battle swamps Wapella

Worlds away from Chicago, the village of Wapella, population 651, is defying an order from the attorney general to make paper copies of records in response to FOIA requests.

Since February, the village 50 miles northeast of Springfield has posted on its website 149 FOIA requests, almost all from the same four village residents, and accompanying responses. At least 19 requests for review from village residents are pending at the attorney general's office.

Nothing is easy when it comes to FOIA in Wapella.

When the village provided photocopies on yellow paper, requesters objected, saying copies were hard to read and pointing out that the law requires white paper. Requesters have, among other things, asked for copies of water bills, W2 income tax forms and receipts for purchases dating back as far as 2005. The request for W2s turned into a mess when officials posted the documents on the village website, with Social Security numbers still legible.

A full-time employee now gets \$10 an hour to process FOIA requests and a part-time employee also helps, said village trustee Sharon Riddle.

"I think Wapella is a snapshot of what can go wrong with FOIA requests and how a very local, very isolated political battle can explode into something that swamps the (attorney general's) public access counselor," said Don Craven, an attorney for the Illinois Press Association who litigates FOIA cases. "They obviously have a very active electorate and a curiosity about public records unknown anywhere else in the state of Illinois."

Paper copies

In March, the attorney general's office issued a binding opinion to the village, ordering officials to provide paper copies instead of posting documents on the village website. It is one of two binding opinions issued by Madigan's office since the attorney general gained the power to issue such opinions in FOIA cases this year. Only a judge can overrule the attorney general.

Despite the ruling, the village still refuses to provide paper copies. It's a matter of cost and efficiency, Riddle said.

"Our stance is, they don't have to be paper copies," Riddle said. "We got a new copy machine because we were running ours ragged. They wanted a copy of the instruction book for the copy machine. How ridiculous is that?"

Ridiculous or not, the attorney general can get a court order.

"It remains my hope that we don't have to take out that particular tool, sharp as it is, but we will do it," said Cara Smith, public access counselor for the attorney general's office.

Roger Huebner, general counsel for the Illinois Municipal League, questioned the wisdom of suing Wapella.

"Are they really going to file an action saying you have to make the copies?" Huebner asked. "And Wapella's going to be compelled to defend that? All for what most of us would admit is for someone who's just jerking Wapella around on FOIA requests?"

'Very trying' to get documents

Jane Buraglio, who has made at least 49 FOIA requests in Wapella this year, says she isn't jerking anyone around.

"It's essentially taxpayer money that they're spending," said Buraglio, a former village clerk who was fired last year. "The only way to know if they're operating in the best interest of the taxpayer is to have access to the financial records. ... It's been a very, very trying situation to get any documents out of this village."

In addition to financial, payroll and utility records, Buraglio has requested copies of all ordinances and resolutions approved since 2008, copies of FOIA requests received by the village, a copy of the village insurance policy, receipts showing what equipment the village has sold (learning that someone bought a wheel barrow with no wheel for \$2, cash) and a copy of everything posted in the window of the village hall on April 13, including lists of people who had made FOIA requests.

Buraglio said the village has attempted to harass requesters by posting their names at the village hall and on the Internet. Riddle says it's the other way around.

"It's harassment," Riddle said. "They're just FOIA'ing everything. They know they can FOIA, so they just do it."

And the attorney general's office is square in the middle of the fight.

"No one seems to be speaking the same language in Wapella - our office is inundated with requests concerning that village," Smith said.

Smith thinks her office can play peacemaker, so she's scheduled a June 30 mediation session.

"We are looking forward to getting everyone in a room," Smith said. "I have every belief we are going to be successful in calming the waters in Wapella - that's my goal. I'm quite capable of bringing that about."

Smith also said she isn't worried about other government bodies disobeying orders from the attorney general.

"I am not concerned that there's going to be a groundswell of public bodies saying 'No, attorney general,'" Smith said. "They're trying to follow the law, we're trying to enforce the law. In the end, we'll get there."

-- *Bruce Rushton*

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THE CHRONICLE

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June 21, 2010

Chancellor of U. System of Georgia Quit BP's Board Just Before Spill

By Paul Fain

Erroll B. Davis Jr. served on BP's board of directors for 12 years, retiring just five days before the company's Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded. The chancellor of the University System of Georgia, who was also a member of the board's safety committee, is thereby linked to one of the nation's worst environmental disasters, and a share of the resulting litigation and negative publicity.

The four-member safety committee has received extra attention in class-action lawsuits, at least two of which name Mr. Davis. According to news reports last week, BP faces more than 225 lawsuits so far over business and property damages and shareholder losses associated with the spill.

By most accounts, Mr. Davis has been a successful chancellor at the University System of Georgia. He has brought business acumen to the system during a time of tight finances, encouraging it to bulk up its audit and human resource functions, and creating a risk-management system.

But now he has become the latest high-profile example of the risks of corporate-board service for college leaders. Ruth J. Simmons, president of Brown University, stepped down this year from the board of Goldman Sachs, which has been under fire for its contribution to the financial crisis and for big bonus payments to executives. Her board service had drawn unflattering attention from students, alumni, and *The New York Times*.

And Ohio State University's president, E. Gordon Gee, retired last year from the board of Massey Energy Company. His exit preceded an April accident at one of the company's West Virginia coal mines in which 29 miners were killed. Environmental groups and students had pressured Mr. Gee to quit the board for some time. He had also been named in a lawsuit filed by family members of two victims of a previous fatal accident at a Massey-owned mine, which the company later settled.

All three of the university leaders declined interview requests about their board service.

Roughly one-third of college presidents serve on a corporate board. The directorships are personally lucrative, often paying as much as \$200,000 a year with additional stock awards. Universities benefit as well, through well-connected presidents who mingle with potential donors and learn about corporate management.

But the practice has faced new scrutiny in recent years. University governing boards have begun limiting the number of corporate boards on which a president may serve, typically to two.

Sen. Charles E. Grassley, an Iowa Republican who has been active in

monitoring nonprofit governance, said in 2008 that college presidents should reconsider corporate board service. And Stephen J. Trachtenberg, president emeritus of George Washington University and an expert on the presidency, said last week that corporate boards may no longer be worth the risk. "On the whole, you're better off not doing it," he said.

Mr. Trachtenberg served on the board of the former Washington-based Riggs Bank. But when the bank was ensnared in money-laundering allegations, Mr. Trachtenberg was named in lawsuits, which he said were a distraction.

"I worked my weekends on Riggs issues," said Mr. Trachtenberg. "That's time I wasn't working for the university."

Risks and Rewards

BP's board includes 10 outside directors, who do not work for the company, as well as five current BP executives. These 15 board members are the ultimate fiduciaries for the British energy conglomerate, which is the world's fourth largest corporation.

Mr. Davis is part of a small but growing cadre of nonacademic leaders of public university systems. He joined BP's board in 1998, the same year he was named president and chief executive of Alliant Energy Corporation, a Wisconsin-based energy company. But while he was in his post in Georgia, Mr. Davis took on new responsibility with BP's board, joining the safety, ethics, and environmental-assurance committee in May 2009, on which he served until his retirement from the board on April 15. Mr. Davis also serves on the boards of General Motors and Union Pacific Corporation, and has been a board member for the University of Wisconsin system and Carnegie Mellon University, where he is a life trustee.

BP's corporate documents give a glimpse of Mr. Davis's role as a director. The company paid him about \$155,000 in 2009. He held 76,497 shares of BP stock as of last December, the value of which has plummeted since the spill began. Also in 2009, he earned \$111,670 from General Motors and \$221,100 from Union Pacific, according to filings with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission.

BP's full board met 12 times last year, and Mr. Davis attended 10 of those meetings, BP documents say. The safety committee held seven meetings in 2009, four of which Mr. Davis was eligible to attend. He participated in three.

In March 2005, a BP refinery exploded in Texas City, Texas, killing 15 people and injuring many more. According to BP documents, the safety committee observed several improvements after that accident, including the creation of a new safety team and management system and an MIT-affiliated operational training program.

The committee's other tasks include "reviewing material to be placed before shareholders which address BP's environmental, safety, and ethical performance, and making recommendations to the board about their adoption and publication."

Those responsibilities make board members likely targets for lawsuits.

For example, a class-action lawsuit filed in May in Louisiana federal court by Robert H. Ludlow Jr., on behalf of all BP investors, says shareholders invested in the company based on the company and board's "repeated assurances of BP's safe operations."

The lawsuit, which specifically names Mr. Davis, alleges that BP misled investors by "cutting corners and reducing its spending on safety measures in an effort to maximize profits in the Gulf of Mexico."

Proceed With Care

Mr. Davis has not faced widespread criticism for his role at BP, unlike the presidents of both Brown and Ohio State, who received negative attention for their longtime corporate board seats with controversial companies. That was particularly the case for Ms. Simmons. In February she announced that she would leave the board, citing "increasing time requirements" with her day job.

Ohio environmental groups had led the charge in criticizing Mr. Gee, who had chaired Massey's safety, environmental, and public-policy committee. When he left the board, a local environmental group's leader said "Dr. Gee's public-relations nightmare is over."

Many higher-education leaders defend service on corporate boards, saying it's good for the companies as well as presidents and their institutions.

Steven S. Reinemund, dean of the business schools at Wake Forest University, is a former chairman and chief executive for PepsiCo. He says the "good of society is certainly well served" by having the perspective of college presidents on corporate boards. However, Mr. Reinemund, who now serves on the boards of Exxon Mobil Corporation, American Express, and Marriott International, says sitting CEO's in the corporate sphere generally are limited to one board seat. It's a standard that he says should apply to college presidents as well.

Some companies are riskier than others when it comes to board service, says Nancy B. Rapoport, a professor of law and a corporate-governance expert at the law school of the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, particularly energy corporations and financial firms.

She says extra danger comes with any company "where the magnitude of the mistake is going to have broad ripple effects."

Corporate boards demand more now of directors, thanks mostly to new regulations passed in the wake of the collapse of Enron and WorldCom. And the likelihood of being sued has also increased, experts say. But a good chunk of the new scrutiny reflects a broad societal shift toward populism and questioning large institutions, said Terry W. Hartle, senior vice president for government and public affairs at the American Council on Education.

That increased tension means presidents should take care when considering corporate board seats, he said. "This is not something that should be entered into lightly."

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Quick Takes

June 22, 2010

Mounting Congressional Scrutiny of For-Profit Colleges

Five Congressional Democrats on Monday asked the U.S. Government Accountability Office to begin a study of for-profit higher education that would look at institutional quality and business practices. The request comes just days after a House of Representatives hearing on accreditation that included criticism on the sector, and on the same day that witnesses were announced for Thursday's Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee hearing on the for-profits. (The group scheduled to testify has a decided slant against the sector. The witnesses are Kathleen Tighe, the U.S. Department of Education's inspector general; Steven Eisman, an investor who has warned that the sector is "as socially destructive and morally bankrupt as the subprime mortgage industry"; Yasmine Issa, a former student at the for-profit Sanford Brown Institute; Margaret Reiter, a former California deputy attorney general and consumer advocate; and Sharon Thomas Parrott, chief compliance officer at DeVry, Inc.)

The request for a GAO review came from the chairs of the House and Senate education committees -- Rep. George Miller of California and Sen. Tom Harkin of Iowa -- and three other influential members, Sen. Richard Durbin of Illinois and Reps. Timothy Bishop of New York and Ruben Hinojosa of Texas. Citing "recent press reports [that] have raised questions about the quality of proprietary institutions" in a letter to the GAO, the members requested information on the sector's recent growth, as well as data on program quality, student outcomes and the amount of corporate revenues that comes from the Title IV federal financial aid program and other government sources. They also asked for a consideration of whether the Education Department's regulations on Title IV program integrity (in the process of being revised) do enough to safeguard against waste and fraud.

Harris N. Miller, president of the Career College Association, the sector's largest lobbying group, said he welcomes the review. "We have every expectation that the GAO, using facts and figures, will provide a full and fair review." He also asked that the Education Department hold off on issuing final regulations aimed at ensuring integrity in federal financial aid programs: "Secretary Duncan has said repeatedly he wants to get the regulatory changes right, and waiting for the GAO to conduct its study is one way to further that goal."



News

Seed of Doubt

June 22, 2010



Is online education as good as traditional, face-to-face education?

It is a loaded question. Online programs comprise the fastest-growing segment of higher education, with brick-and-mortar colleges — many ailing from budget cuts — seeing online as a way to make money and expand their footprints.

Meanwhile, some politicians are eager for public institutions to embrace online education as a way to educate more people at a lower cost.

These movements have much invested in online education being equal or superior to the old-fashioned kind. And since a Department of Education meta-analysis last summer concluded that “on average, students in online learning conditions performed better than those receiving face-to-face instruction,” many advocates now consider the matter closed.

Not so fast, say researchers at the National Bureau of Economic Research.

The Education Department’s study was deeply flawed and its implications have been overblown, say the authors of a working paper released this month by the bureau.

“None of the studies cited in the widely-publicized meta-analysis released by the U.S. Department of Education included randomly-assigned students taking a full-term course, with live versus online delivery mechanisms, in settings that could be directly compared (i.e., similar instructional materials delivered by the same instructor),” they write. “The evidence base on the relative benefits of live versus online education is therefore tenuous at best.”

Mark Rush, an economics professor at the University of Florida and one of the study’s three co-authors, says he thinks the Education Department was under immense pressure to reassure online education’s many stakeholders, particularly cash-strapped state higher-education systems, that online education is just as good, if not better, than the classroom kind. But the fact that it “did not compare apples to apples” and severely lacked experimental data means that to treat the meta-study as a conclusive vote of confidence for online education would be scientifically irresponsible. “The conclusion that Internet-based and live classes are comparable might have been reached a little hastily,” Rush says.

Rush and his collaborators — Lu Yin, also of the University of Florida, and Northwestern University’s David N. Figlio, the lead author — sought to contribute to the online-education debate something they say it sorely lacks: reliable data collected via a controlled experiment.

In spring 2007, they randomly assigned 327 volunteers enrolled in an introductory microeconomics course to either attend the class lectures live or watch them online. Both groups would have access to the same ancillary materials and access to office hours and graduate assistants; the only difference would be the mode of lecture delivery.

They found no statistically significant differences between the academic performances of the two groups generally. However, they did find that Hispanic students, male students, and low-achieving students in the online group fared significantly worse than their counterparts in the live-attendance group.

These findings do not exactly refute the conclusions of the Education Department's meta-analysis. Nor is the new study without flaws of its own, which the authors enumerate in detail — though not the most obvious, which is that videotaped lectures are a relatively primitive form of online teaching, and, where they are used, are usually only part of the package.

But Rush says the main takeaway of the bureau's experiment is not that he and his co-authors are right or that the Education Department's study was wrong; just that there is much more work — much more precise work — to be done before any firm pronouncements can be made on the merits of online education relative to the face-to-face kind.

An Irrelevant Truth?

Barbara Means, director of the Center for Technology and Learning at SRI International and lead author of the Education Department's meta-study, says the bureau's paper, in addition to being rife with erroneous claims, draws conclusions that are essentially irrelevant to the debate over online education.

By taking pains to isolate the online-versus-classroom variable while keeping other variables constant, Means says Rush and his collaborators miss a crucial point: that what distinguishes online education from classroom education has little to do with the fact that one comes on a computer screen and the other does not.

That narrow distinction "is something that most people in the field of technology feel is not particularly interesting," Means says. That is not how online education works. To the contrary, most modern online programs expressly try to present course content in a way that is unique to the online environment. If videotaped lectures are included, they are often a small part of a larger package. "The point of using the online technology," Means say, "is to do things that you cannot do face-to-face."

In other words: Assessing all of the points of departure at once in a controlled experiment is an implausible task, and pretending that the online delivery mode is the only point of departure is an irrelevant one.

Accordingly, that was not what Education Department's meta-analysis sought to do, Means says; rather, it sought to measure the relative "impact" of online programs, using a less scientific, but perhaps more practical, methodology.

As for the question of the politics, Means says she was never felt any pressure to affirm the merits of online education, and was indeed "surprised" by the results — which, she noted, were reviewed independently before they were published.

— Steve Kolowich

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News

Spiders' Web

June 22, 2010



The University of Richmond is opening up its Rolodex.

In a move that reflects the university's desire to help students land jobs after graduation, Richmond is stepping up its efforts to connect students with successful alumni. While networking among young and older graduates is nothing new, Richmond is taking some deliberate steps to connect current students more frequently and formally with those who came before. Chief among those steps is a rather novel decision to combine the university's career services offices with alumni relations and fund-raising operations.

For obvious reasons, it's not uncommon for alumni relations and fund raising to be joined at the hip -- and that's long been the arrangement at Richmond. Far less traditional, however, is the notion of pulling career services operations out of student affairs -- where such programs are typically housed -- and linking that function directly with the alumni association and advancement office.

"The rationale was that we really wanted to connect our alumni with our students, and really try and harness the power of our alumni network," said Tom Gutenberger, vice president of advancement.

"We've got to be more creative and I think more aggressive in helping students find jobs, and that's why we're going to lean harder on alumni than we ever have," he added. "At the same time our alumni and parents are saying, 'We really want to help you do this.'"

It's no secret that prospective students and parents pay attention to job placement rates at Richmond and elsewhere, and one of the university's goals is certainly to assure them that there's "gainful employment" at the end of the college journey. Richmond's latest survey of graduates, which measured job placement or graduate school attendance, found 92 percent of graduates had secured positions in six months and 95 percent had in a year.

The goals of linking alumni affairs, career services and advancement don't end with improving placement rates, however. Richmond officials say they can further engage alumni by giving them an opportunity to help current students, and building those relationships could lead to future alumni gifts to the university. As for the students who may score a good job or internship through an alumni connection, that's something that's likely to strengthen the students' own allegiances to their alma mater as well, the theory goes.

"If they feel like the university helped them get a job, it's one more connection and level of indebtedness. I think long term that will help a great deal," said Gutenberger, himself a 1987 Richmond graduate.

As far as the day-to-day advice students receive, they aren't likely to notice a huge difference when Richmond changes its reporting structure in July. Career services personnel, who bring student affairs backgrounds with them, will still be on the front lines advising students on opportunities. But Richmond envisions significantly greater collaboration between the three offices. When advancement officers talk to potential donors -- often identified through alumni affairs -- they'll be asking whether the prospects have job or internship opportunities for students, and passing that information along to career services.

It's serendipitous that Richmond's mascot is the spider, and university officials are already playing up the "wonderful web" of contacts they hope to introduce to students. Kristin Woods, associate vice president for alumni relations, sounds giddy as she ticks off some of the university's favored sons and daughters: Kevin Eastman, assistant coach of the Boston Celtics; Tim Finchem, commissioner of the

PGA Tour; and Melanie Liddle Healey, a high-ranking Procter & Gamble executive.

"By having an engaged alumni network, our degrees become more valuable," said Woods, whose title will expand to associate vice president for alumni and career services come July.

Before coming to Richmond, Woods worked at Bucknell University -- an early adopter of the combined alumni, fund-raising and career services structure. Pam Keiser, interim executive director of alumni relations and career services at Bucknell, said the arrangement has allowed the university to better link students, alumni and the development office.

"We had a good relationship with our alumni office, but there definitely were some missed opportunities to be strategic with our alumni population," said Keiser, who served as senior associate director of the career development center before the offices merged in 2008.

By way of example, Keiser notes that she never knew who development officers were meeting with prior to the merger. Now Keiser scans their travel itineraries, and she often requests that the advancement officer tell the potential donor about opportunities to work with students on career development.

The results of Bucknell's merger have been positive, Keiser says. Despite the economic downturn, the university has added about 1,000 new internship opportunities for students in the last two years. The university's latest job placement survey also shows that, for the class of 2009, just 5 percent of graduates were still seeking employment nine months after graduation.

Bucknell is careful to stress with students, however, that they'll only secure the kind of positions they want if they pound the pavement themselves.

"We let them know that they need to own this. This is their future," Keiser said. "While we're here to advise them every step of the way, if they're not invested in it and they're not a part of it, it may help to increase the odds that they're not successful."

— Jack Stripling

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