

THE 50% RULE—GOING AWAY

A Challenge for the Field

Michael Simonson
Co-Editor

Dan Carnevale, the outstanding reporter for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, recently wrote about the 50% rule, the U.S. Department of Education's regulation that prevents any college that enrolls more than 50% of its students at a distance or provides more than 50% of its courses via distance education from participating in federal student-aid programs (Carnevale, 2006). This rule was passed in 1992 in response to an increase in fraud by diploma mills and shady correspondence programs. Many educators considered this rule to be one very critical impediment to the growth of distance education, and a statement by the federal government about the lack of legitimacy of the field.

In the early 1990s, the Internet and World Wide Web were just beginning to make an impact and few in mainstream education considered online learning to ever be the major force in education it has become. We now know that those who did not see the impact of distance education were wrong; online education has exploded in popularity and continues to grow in reach and stature. In the 15 years since the 50% rule was enacted, online education in higher education has grown so rapidly that the Sloan Consortium now feels that distance education is "entering the mainstream,"

with over 2.3 million higher education students enrolled in online courses in 2004 (Allen & Seaman, 2005).

The impact of changing the 50% rule may seem to some to be unimportant, just a change in an obscure law. To others, the law change represents the acceptance of distance education by the public, a move needed because of the huge numbers of students who are demanding to learn at a distance. To a few, modification of the 50% rule is seen as a challenge: a challenge to demonstrate the effectiveness of distance education; to show the positive consequences of offering teaching when and where learning is needed; an opportunity to institute the use of best practices; and as an implied demand that administrators expect rigorous, well-designed, and high-quality instructional experiences for distant students whom have sought out their institutions.

REFERENCES

- Allen, I., & Seaman, J. (2005). *Growing by degrees: Online education in the United States, 2005*. Wellesley, MA: Sloan Consortium.
- Carnevale, D. (2006). Rule change may spark online boom for colleges. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 52(22), A1.