August 28, 2015

The Honorable Lamar Alexander The Honorable Senator Patty Murray

Chairman Ranking Member

Committee on Health, Labor, Education and Pensions

United States Senate

The Honorable John Kline The Honorable Bobby Scott

Chairman Ranking Member

Committee on Education and the Workforce

Unites States House of Representatives

Dear Chairman Alexander, Chairman Kline, Ranking Member Murray and Ranking Member Scott:

We write in response to recent public statements which appear to question the integrity of online education. For 100 years UPCEA (University Professional Continuing Education Association) has been the higher education association focused on the adult learner, whether through continuing education or more recently online learning; OLC (Online Learning Consortium) is the leading professional online learning society devoted to advancing quality online learning. Together, we represent more than 900 institutions - including most of the leading public and private colleges and universities in North America - dedicated to developing the most effective approaches to the delivery of online education and meeting the highest standards of academic integrity.

We believe that these recent statements reflect a very serious misconception about online education, its importance to millions of Americans and its role in achieving the universally sought goals of making quality higher education accessible, better and less costly to the learner and the public alike. As you prepare for reauthorization of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA), we are writing to request that you consider the true facts about online education and its critical significance for contemporary learners.

**Online Is *for* Today’s Learners**

When the current federal policy architecture for the support and regulation of higher education was established in the 1960’s, television was still an evolving technology and the Internet was two decades in the future. Equally important, the typical college student in 1965 was traditional age and full-time. Today more than four-fifths of Americans enrolled in postsecondary institutions are “non-traditional” learners: working adults, single parents, veterans and military personnel, caregivers, and others for whom full-time classroom-based learning creates enormous challenges of time, access and cost.

These learners need access to high-quality courses and programs that allow them to meet the competing demands of work, family and education. Currently, fully a third of students – approximately six million – are taking at least one online course1. And in a recent study, 70 percent of college administrators reported that online learning is critical to their institution’s long-term strategy, up from less than half in 20021. Online education is an integral part of the mainstream of American – and indeed worldwide – higher education and essential to the success of millions of today’s learners.

**Research Reveals the Standard of Quality**

Meanwhile, as technology has rapidly evolved, the quality of the online learning experience has dramatically improved. What was once little more than videos of professors giving lectures, has evolved into a completely immersive and interactive learning environment that rivals, and in many key respects, surpasses face-to-face instruction.

As early as 2010, a Department of Education meta-analysis of research into the relative effectiveness of online and classroom-based learning put to rest any remaining question that what goes on in a classroom is inherently superior to what can be accomplished online; indeed, that study, and others that have followed, indicate that online learning is often superior in achieving measurable learner outcomes2. To question the inherent “integrity” and “quality” of online learning in 2015 is simply unsupported by overwhelming evidence.

**Distinguishing Online *Learning* from Online *Universities***

It is also important to distinguish between online *learning* and online *universities*. Online learning is a proven, effective and efficient way to reach a variety of learners, who, for a variety of reasons, cannot or will not use the “traditional” classroom model for all or part of their postsecondary education. Online universities are just like any other institutions of higher education: some are extraordinary, some are very good and some, like many brick-and-mortar institutions, are no more than passable.

More to the point, it has been the leading public and private universities, such as MIT and the University of Maryland University College, that have been in the forefront of developing and delivering affordable, accessible, and innovative online courses and programs for years, and, in fact, enroll the vast majority of students who take online courses. To showcase the work of the sector, the Online Learning Consortium has for years shared ‘effective practice’ examples including techniques, strategies or practices through an annual peer-reviewed awards competition (<http://onlinelearningconsortium.org/about/olc-awards/effective-practices/>). A sampling of effective practices include: “Virtual ChemLab” at Brigham Young University; “Converting ‘On-the-Fly’ Classroom Lecture to Online Format for Residential Students” at Pennsylvania State University; “ELATEwiki: E-Learning and Teaching Exchange Wiki to Support Faculty Development” at Kansas State University; and “The Use of Virtual Classrooms to Enhance Learning and Satisfaction in an Online Social Work Program” at Boston University.

OLC and UPCEA members are deeply invested in increasing access to quality online learning that leads to improved degree attainment, less time-to-completion and lower cost. In the end this improves American competitiveness and the quality of life of our citizens. To broadly suggest that online programs – because they are online – lack “integrity” is beyond untrue.

Ill-informed attacks on online learning are dispiriting to the efforts of millions of hard-working, learners who are using 21st Century technologies to advance in their careers and improve their lives, and demeaning to the many thousands of dedicated faculty, instructional designers, technologists and academic leaders who have committed their careers to what is, without any question, the future of learning worldwide.

We stand ready to provide you and your colleagues with accurate, unbiased information and data on the impact of online learning on American higher education and what must be done to support the growth and evolution of this essential component of our postsecondary system. We look forward to working with all who are engaged in this critically important reauthorization of the HEA to assist in the development of policies and programs that encourage the creative development and use of online programs to enable many more learners to succeed in their chosen path through higher education.

Sincerely,

 

Robert J Hansen, Ph.D. Kathleen Ives, D.M.

Chief Executive Officer Chief Executive Officer and Executive Director

UPCEA OLC

[1] Babson Research Survey Group and Quahog Research Group, LLC, Grade Level – Tracking Online Education, 2015, http://onlinelearningconsortium.org/read/survey-reports-2014/.

[2] US Department of Education, 2010, https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/tech/evidence-based-practices/finalreport.pdf.