

Testimony of Dr. Michael F. Adams,
President of The University of Georgia
Presented to The Congressional Web-based Education Commission
Sen. Bob Kerrey, Chair
February 2, 2000

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman. I am Michael F. Adams, president of the University of Georgia and the incoming chair of the American Council on Education. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today. I hope that I can provide some insight on the issues you are discussing. I believe I am a credible educator, but I do not want to hold myself out as an expert on high technology. I have, however, been in senior administration for 20 years and have participated in the growing use of high-tech tools in education.

I recently delivered the annual State of the University speech, and in that speech I admitted to the assembled faculty and students that I had succumbed to the reflective mood surrounding the dawn of the Year 2000, and that much of my reflection had focused on the University of Georgia. UGA is the oldest state-chartered university in this nation, having been established by the state legislature in 1785. It may come as no surprise to you that it took some 16 years for the educational enterprise to begin -- bureaucracy and politics, even in the 18th century it seems, slowed the progress toward the goal.

Education today is a much more complicated and, I believe, better enterprise than it was 200 years ago. Simply the breadth and depth of knowledge demand different approaches. I had my first experience with a computer more than 30 years ago, but it has been only in the past decade that the widespread applicability of the personal computer to educational pedagogy has become apparent. At the present time, the computer is a terrific tool for independent study. It is clearly a large component of distance learning and provides ancillary support to the educational process.

In 1801, Josiah Meigs, the first president of the University of Georgia, convened the

University's first class under a tree on what we now call North Campus. He began teaching students face to face, in close physical contact, asking questions and listening to answers, engaging in dialogue with his students. While we've come a long way since 1801, I am here to urge you not to stray too far from that model of good teaching. I'm no Luddite. There are clearly ways to improve teaching and learning through technology. In many ways, the effective use of today's technology requires a better qualified teacher than I, who taught primarily before the computer age. But the fundamental element of good teaching remains contact between a good teacher and a willing student.

We should pause to contrast that class beneath a tree with today's discussions of the new learning paradigm and distance learning taking place at the American Council on Education. Challenges for educators now include redefined student markets, evolving definitions of teacher-student contact, new measures of institutional and programmatic quality, and changing assessment models as we evaluate quality, standards, and ethics. To explore these issues further, ACE this past September commissioned six policy papers on key issues related to distance education: *Issues of Anytime Anywhere Education: Policy Implications of Distance Education*; *Leadership Challenges of Distance Education*; *Commitment to Quality in Distance Education*; *Student Learning as Academic Currency*; *Barriers to Distance Education: Governmental, Legal, and*

Institutional; and *Partnerships in Distance Education*. Underlying each of these concerns is, of course, the weighty issue of intellectual property rights.

With these ACE discussions as context, I'd like to leave you with few thoughts about the role of the Web in higher education. First,

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there is clearly an opportunity for us to serve non-traditional students through web-based courses. At the University of Georgia, we are developing for the state's Board of Regents a statewide system of online courses. This system will provide a streamlined mechanism for admissions, enrollment and registration; a portal for entry into University System institutions; and methods for gauging a particular student's potential for success in web-based education.

It is important to note that in many ways, taking a course online can be far more difficult than taking that course in a traditional classroom setting. It requires a great deal of self-discipline and self-motivation. It does not offer the social structure or group support of the traditional classroom and removes the student from easy face-to-face access to the professor, virtually eliminating the opportunity to stop by Dr. Smith's office to talk about a problem with an assignment. On the other hand, however, I am cognizant of the fact that active e-mail exchanges and interactive content discussions have made faculty accessible to students in very different ways, producing dynamic learning experiences around the clock. Increasingly, the responsibilities of faculty members are being redefined by such opportunities. In response, we must acknowledge the varied costs associated with the value of new modes of learning--costs in training, time, and compensation.

Second, we in higher education must realize that the way students learn has changed dramatically in the past 20 years or so. Today's students literally grew up in a digital world. My childhood was memorialized in a series of black-and-white snapshots taped into a photo album; today's freshman at UGA has seen his or her life on videotape. There were

three television channels when I was a child; today's students have at least 50 on cable and hundreds on satellite. Perhaps most important for this discussion, they have had computers at home and school for at least a decade.

Twenty percent of the 14,500 students who applied to the University of Georgia last year did so electronically. Our admissions staff maintains a website that allows students to track the progress of their applications; in one month last semester, there were 25,000 hits on that page, or almost 1,000 hits per day. If the students coming into higher education are that comfortable with the Web, what are we doing to respond to that level of comfort?

At UGA, we are doing several things. We are working furiously to have all of our dorm rooms wired into the campus network so that students can access the Web, check their e-mail or submit electronic assignments from their rooms. The University of Georgia is the world's largest institutional user of WebCT, a software program designed for use in the higher education

classroom. In the fall of 1999, there were 462 courses using WebCT at UGA, involving more than 300 faculty members and some 30,000 student accounts. We provide support and guidance for faculty members who want to incorporate the Web into their courses, offering up to 14 hours of cumulative training that covers the basics (such as how to post a syllabus on the web) as well as advanced uses of e-mail listservs, Web links and other features.

Do I think that the lecture is dead? No. I still believe that a good lecture is one of the best teaching tools in a professor's repertoire. Can a good lecture be supplemented and improved -- indeed, targeted for today's

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student -- by the effective use of the Web? Absolutely.

Third, we must recognize that despite our students' comfort with the computer, the Web is a vast, often uncharted place. Our students are adept at finding information on the Web, but are they equally adept at discerning its value? Daniel Boorstin, the former Librarian of Congress, said "We are drowning in data but starved for knowledge." The ocean of data which threatens to drown us grows deeper every day and the Internet puts it all at our fingertips. Our role is not only to teach our students how to use the Internet -- which we are doing through computer literacy classes held in computer labs around campus and in the dorms -- but also to teach them how to use it well, how to use it effectively, how to discern the value of what they find there. One can get data from the Web, but I do not believe that one can gain knowledge from a computer screen.

In addition, we are using our library services to support and supplement the traditional classroom. This fall, we will begin construction on a major classroom and library facility encompassing 200,000 square feet, with the top two floors designed to accommodate changing technology through an electronic teaching library. Beyond the Athens campus, the University of Georgia has been crucial in the development of the GALILEO system, which provides electronic information resources to all libraries in Georgia. This system allows access for students and the general public to more than 3,000 periodicals. We are also negotiating with publishers to secure electronic access to scholarly books, and we are actively converting older and rarer books to digital form. The virtual library may well be one of the most powerful tools that the

Internet Age brings to college and university campuses.

The accessibility of information afforded by such Web initiatives is accompanied by a dramatic shift in the ways we think about curriculum. Previously closed, secure, internally debated curricular matters are now open to peer review and external challenge. This openness of curriculum across the spectrum has brought new vigor to the daily business of academe.

Finally, we must address the issue of standards and accreditation as distance learning and web-based courses proliferate. While I want to commend the Congress and this Commission for beginning to address the range of issues regarding web-based education, and while I believe that there is much more good than bad out there, one of the areas where we as educators have not done well is in dealing with the accreditation issues that spring from web-based education.

I have just concluded a six-year term on the executive council of the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. For the past two years I was chair. I have participated in numerous meetings about the issue of cross-regional accreditation. While some progress has been made, there is yet a lot to do.

My own view is that if an institution offers courses across regional lines, that institution should meet the standards of the region into which it is "beaming" courses. In other words, institutions should play by local rules. This is my own personal view, and I have colleagues who respectfully disagree. What is happening right now, however, is that some legitimate, well-managed institutions are being put at a disadvantage when someone operates down the road or over the Internet simply to offer

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courses. That "virtual university" may not be providing facilities, library resources, counseling or academic support services, all of which contribute to and support the learning process.

I also serve on the board of the Southern Regional Education Board, which administers an Electronic Campus, reaching more than 15,000 students in 16 states. Such a model might work well as we address the thorny issue of accreditation and standards. In fact, I would hold up the SREB's Principle of Good Practice agreement as a template for future collaborations among institutions.

I know that the Congress and members of this Commission share the concern that we not replace poor face-to-face education with poor web-based education. The public needs some way to determine the credibility and value of institutions promising a degree over the Web.

Yet as we marvel at the ways in which eCommerce has refashioned business over the course of the last year or two, we must acknowledge that web-based education has the potential to do the same for education at all levels. Under discussion should be financial aid, teacher loads, student services, student and faculty interaction, the way that we measure EFT, pedagogy, and a whole range of issues.

I am convinced that the Internet and the Web can improve education. I am, however, concerned that we not over-extol its value. True education requires interchange and discussion. We need to remain cognizant that effective education requires experts to guide students through the process of learning.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak to you today. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.