

# ***We are not always right when we speak out, but we are always wrong when we do not.***

Distancing Education  
Remarks for the Annual Meeting  
8 June 2002



By Jane Buck Ph.D

National President of American Association of University Professors.

The theme for the 88th annual meeting, distancing education, suggests many possible topics. I shall address three salient ones that I believe merit the Association's scrutiny: The psychological and physical distance between students and professors, the distance between what a university could and should be and what it too frequently has become, and the distance between the educational opportunities afforded the rich and the poor. By concentrating on three major areas, I realize that I risk oversimplification. Each includes a multitude of often overlapping causative factors, and the three themes are not completely independent.

Many of us have commented publicly and privately on a widening gap between students and professors as more institutions experiment with online instruction. Last October, just weeks after the horrific terror attacks, I participated in an international seminar on the virtual university in San Juan, Puerto Rico. The well-attended meeting was organized by the UNESCO European Center for Higher Education and the University of Puerto Rico and attracted participants from several continents. Most were enthusiastic advocates of electronically delivered courses. In my presentation, I noted the obvious irony that even this group found it necessary to exchange ideas in real time, traveling long distances to a physical location, at considerable expense, in the face of possible terror attacks. There is no adequate substitute for face-to-face contact. Critics have compared the difference between online and classroom learning to the difference between reading someone else's love letters and being in the presence of the beloved. They view the virtual university as an inferior, if not fraudulent, substitute for the real thing.

The distance between professor and student generated by the virtual classroom is not limited, of course, to the lack of classroom contact, but is evidenced in every aspect of the educational experience. Vanished are the personal tutorial session, the hallway encounter, the shared concert or basketball game, the informal debates with intellectually engaged peers, and the academic counseling meeting. Too often, electronically delivered courses are assigned to marginalized contingent faculty, who are unprotected by tenure, seldom evaluated by their professional colleagues, and reduced to being mere "content providers."

I hasten to add that I do not intend a blanket condemnation of technology or even of electronic instruction. Rather, I ask that we weigh carefully the costs and benefits of thoughtlessly plunging into cyberspace in inappropriate ways. As many institutions have learned in months, distance learning is not the cash crop their administrators had been seduced into believing it would be. Cyber courses are expensive, and the costs are not quickly recovered. Many students have serious reservations about the quality of these courses, and enrollment has been much lower than administrators had hoped. There is a growing awareness that we must answer a number of questions through carefully designed experimental studies. Are there certain subjects or topics for which electronic instruction is especially well adapted? Are there those for which it is especially ill suited?

Do certain types of students benefit more than others from electronically delivered courses? How do we measure successful learning and student satisfaction?

The proliferation of technology is an obvious contributor to the growing distance between student and professor in recent years, but it is certainly not the only one or even the greatest one in my view. The overuse and abuse of contingent faculty remains a profound problem. It is not uncommon for contingent faculty to teach as many as six courses per semester at several institutions in order to survive financially. They typically do not keep office hours, because they are not paid to do so, and seldom have offices assigned to them. Students who have reasonable access to contingent faculty outside the classroom are exceptionally fortunate. I emphasize that this is not a reflection on the dedication of the faculty but on the character of the institutions that exploit them.

The second major issue is the distance between the concept of a true university and the pathetic profit center envisioned by governing boards dominated by corporate managers. Debates about what constitutes a university are probably not only inevitable, but eternal. Most of us would agree that McDonald's Hamburger University does not meet our criteria and that Harvard University does. The debate centers on the nature of the defining parameters. My own view is that an institution earns the right to call itself a university only when it provides its students the intellectual tools that will allow them to think critically, solve novel problems, participate in civil society as informed citizens, and gain a measure of personal satisfaction. Universities that succumb to devising the curriculum du jour abrogate their responsibility not only to their students, but also to society.

The primary purpose of a university is not to produce acquiescent automatons whose mindless toil will, in the short term, satisfy the greed of a global economy that devalues human life and a sustainable environment. Rather, it is to produce an educated citizenry. As faculty, we must resist efforts to narrow the curriculum, so that it comprises only those skills we believe the corporate world demands. As corporations learn from the economically devastating failures of hierarchical management, they will, in their own self-interest, be forced to value literacy, numeracy, and independent thought, qualities that are learned in a broadly based curriculum that balances the purely pragmatic with the traditional liberal arts.

The most disturbing distance is that between educational opportunities afforded the rich and the poor. Last month the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education published a report, *Losing Ground* that concluded that public higher education is becoming less and less accessible for most Americans. Here are a few distressing trends cited in the report. At both two-year and four-year public colleges and universities, tuition cuts into family income at an increasing rate for 80% of the population. In 1980, for example, students from low-income families required 6% of their families' income for tuition at two-year colleges. In 2000, tuition at two-year colleges, as a portion of low-income families' income, had doubled to 12%. Comparable figures for four-year colleges are 13% and 25%, almost double in terms of the portion of family income required.

Although financial aid grants have increased, they have not kept pace with the rate of tuition hikes. In 1986, the average Pell Grant covered 98% of tuition at public four-year colleges, but only 57% in 1999. State aid grants display a similar pattern, covering 75% of tuition in 1986, but only 64% in 1999.

The average student in the lowest 25% of the population with respect to income had cumulative debt of \$7,629 in 1989. Ten years later the figure, in constant dollars, was \$12,888, an increase of 69%.

Over the past two decades, both state and federal governments have increased financial aid for students who demonstrate need, but the increases have not kept pace with tuition, which has increased by 107% since 1980. Most alarmingly, increases in tuition have been greatest in times of economic hardship. The burden, thus, has fallen on those students with the fewest financial resources.

The distancing of higher education from our students and from its own ideals is a grievous threat to the health of our democracy.

We are not always right when we speak out, but we are always wrong when we do not.

Jane Buck, Ph.D.  
National President  
American Association of University Professors