In March of 1999, the North Central Association’s (NCA) Commission on Institutions of Higher Learning, one of the six regional accrediting commissions, accredited the first completely virtual online university, Jones International University (JIU). The accreditation was widely publicized as part of the school’s marketing strategy. Within weeks of the accreditation and the surrounding media buzz, the American Association of University Professors questioned the NCA’s decision to accredit the university. Other organizations representing faculty also expressed disappointment in the decision, even questioning the legitimacy of the NCA’s accreditation process. The NCA argued that the accreditation of JIU broke relatively little new ground; rather the decision served as a flashpoint for faculty at traditional universities to express concern about the increase use of “virtual” tools, including online distance learning and computer-based course management systems.

The Institutions in Crisis case studies provide students of ethics, organizational studies, crisis management, and institutional analysis with opportunities to explore the dynamics of organizations experiencing change, ethical crisis, and evolution. For more information on the set of case studies, please visit the following website: http://kenan.ethics.duke.edu/education/case-studies-in-ethics/institutions-in-crisis/.
**Introduction**

After an intensive three-year period of self-study and a peer-review process, the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA) voted unanimously to accredit Jones International University (JIU) in March of 1999. Instead of welcoming a new institution into the fold, however, faculty from many established institutions expressed significant reservations. JIU was the first completely online or “virtual” university to receive such accreditation. Critics, some of which emerged from the NCA’s most prominent member institutions, voiced concerns about a variety of issues stemming from the unconventional environment in which courses would be taught. For example, Gerald Mead, an assistant dean at Northwestern University stated, “It does bother me. My concern is that in the eyes of many, it will diminish the credibility of the accrediting body. I also am very skeptical about the whole concept of an entire university experience being duplicated on a computer.” The debate sparked questions about the fundamental nature and purpose of higher education: Does a university without a traditional library, limited faculty roles, and degrees solely in business communication qualify as a higher education institution? To whom are accreditation agencies, like the NCA, beholden? Are for-profit universities’ missions inherently different than those of traditional universities? The Commission’s decision stood, and since 1999, the expansion of online education has flourished.

**The Resurrection of Distance Learning**

JIU is a for-profit online provider of distance learning. Its official mission statement reads: “JIU, an institution of Higher Learning, engages with adult learners to inspire and empower them to accomplish their educational goals, lead richer lives, and shape the futures of their organizations and communities.” Despite being the first virtual university to receive regional accreditation, JIU is not particularly innovative within the context of higher education. In fact, distance learning is nothing new in adult education, nor is education that is sponsored, influenced by, or administered by for-profit corporations.

In the 1880s, with the continued expansion of the frontier, for-profit correspondence courses arose to fill a gap in adult education. A decade later, traditional universities were also offering these courses. By the 1920s, there were over 300 correspondence schools and many were financially profitable. Two influential studies published in the 1930s by the University of Chicago and the Carnegie Corporation estimated that between 90 and 95 percent of the students dropped out of the programs before completing them and highlighted other drawbacks, including limited student contact with instructors and the poor quality of instruction. Predictably, a decline in the popularity and number of these schools followed.

By the early 1990s, there was a revival of interest in distance education sparked by the incipient “information revolution” and a view of the Internet on the horizon. In 1994, Educom, known today as Educause, created an influential vision for the National Learning Infrastructure Initiative (NLII), which precipitated the rise of online education. The goal for this infrastructure was a “new paradigm for teaching and learning” that would

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1 The author would like to thank both Dr. James Perley and Dr. Steven Crow for their time and willingness to be interviewed.
4 From http://jonesinternational.edu/about/history/mission.php accessed on 10/14/2008.
5 Noble, *Digital*, p. 6.
6 Noble, *Digital*, pp 18f.
7 Educause is a non-profit organization with members ranging from technology officers, corporate representatives, and higher education faculty and administrators. Their website is: http://www.educause.edu/
“simultaneously increase access (via the network), improve quality (through the availability of individualized, interactive learning materials), and contain costs (by reducing labor intensity in instruction).”8 While many of the specifics of this plan did not come to fruition, partially because aspects of the plan were rendered obsolete by the Internet’s evolution, the paper introducing it and the series of meetings and conferences in which these ideas were honed foreshadowed many of the arguments and justifications for investing in and expanding online learning.9

The Inception of Jones International University

Within this context of growth – both in terms of enrollment and capital infusion – Jones International University emerged. In 1993, plans for the creation of an entirely virtual university began under the initial leadership of Glenn R. Jones, a cable television entrepreneur based in Colorado. Initially, the university set out to accomplish four goals:

1) to serve adult learners worldwide as a global university;
2) to provide accessible and affordable programs – overcoming barriers of time, distance, and cost;
3) to develop and deliver rich content and learning to adult learners across the world via the Internet and Web; and
4) to demonstrate a new model for higher education.10

From its inception, part of JIU’s marketing strategy was achieving regional accreditation.11 Pamela Pease, president of JIU from 1997 to 2004, wrote:

While JIU had the opportunity to seek other forms of certification or accreditation, we sought out the peer review process mandated by the regional accrediting agencies. Our intent was clear from the outset: prospective students need to know that they are receiving the same, or better, quality of education from an online program as would be received from a traditional one.12 JIU began to offer baccalaureate and master’s degrees in business communication in 1995. By 1996, the university entered the accreditation process administered by the NCA’s Commission on Institutions of Higher Education.

Dot-Com Encouragement

There was a lot of enthusiasm for the development of online learning technology from the high-tech industry. During the time of the dot-com boom, education was viewed as the next frontier. In 1999, six billion dollars of venture capital were poured into developing the Internet as an educational tool. That same year Cisco Systems CEO John Chambers stated that education would be “the next big killer application on the Internet.”13

By the late 1990s, there were three primary types of purely online education providers: for-profit, non-profit, and hybrid, which often involved traditional universities.14 For-profit institutions might be epitomized by the University of Phoenix, which was launched specifically to provide education to working adults for whom the traditional

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9 Here is a link to the paper outlining the NLII: http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/html/nli0001.html
10 Pease, Pamela. “Jones International University,” p. 117.
14 Of course, there was also a rise in more hybrid approaches, with online technology being used for part of a course. But the term ‘online education’ in this text refers to courses in which greater than 80 percent of the learning takes place in a virtual context.
campus life and schedule were inconvenient. Western Governors University epitomizes non-profit online education providers. Its foundation emerged out of conversations among state governors who recognized a need to increase educational access for their rural populations in important fields like teaching, business, and healthcare. Finally, and increasingly common, are hybrid models such as eCornell, a for-profit subsidiary of Cornell University, that is focused primarily on providing executive education for corporate managers.

The March toward Accreditation

The NCA is the second oldest of six regional accrediting associations in the United States. Founded in 1895, it covers a 19-state area and accredits over 1,000 higher education institutions. Its mission statement is “[s]erving the common good by assuring and advancing the quality of higher learning.” Similar to the other five regional accrediting agencies, the NCA was founded on the principles of “independence of public and private institutions, academic freedom, self-regulation and voluntarism.”

The six regional accrediting associations play a significant role in the space between institutions and state and federal governments. “Accreditation stands as a bulwark for quality in an environment where institutions are buffeted by state priorities to increase institutional access, improve graduation rates, and operate with less financial support.” Unlike many countries, the U.S. federal government does not evaluate the quality of educational institutions, but does provide them with significant funding, often in the form of student financial aid. Accrediting associations recognized by the U.S. Department of Education provide a mechanism by which institutions are deemed worthy of receiving federal financial aid on behalf of their students. The regional accrediting process also makes transferring credits among accredited institutions easier, and many corporations provide tuition reimbursement only for courses taken at accredited schools.

Among those in higher education circles, the NCA’s reputation varied, and it was considered to be progressive by some and lax by others. It accredited the first for-profit college – Keller Graduate School of Management – in 1977, whose focus was to provide education to working adults. A year later, the NCA accredited the University of Phoenix. The University of Phoenix first sought accreditation in California in the early 1970s, but when the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) did not grant it, they moved to Phoenix to be under the jurisdiction of the NCA, which granted them accreditation under the leadership of Ted Manning. In the 1980s, the NCA accredited National Technological University, which relied on satellite television as the mode of education delivery, and the completely correspondence-based College for Financial Planning. Michael Lambert, the executive director of a national accrediting agency for distance education, remarked that the NCA was “the most

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15 Background information about the NCA’s Commission on Institutions of Higher Education comes from their website, found here: http://www.ncahlc.org/
17 In addition to the six regional accreditation bodies, there are also national accrediting bodies and specialized accrediting bodies. For an accrediting body to be considered legitimate in the public eye, it needs to be recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and/or the Council on Higher Education Accreditation.
18 Wolff, p. 78
aggressive and open-minded about distance learning . . . I find its attitude refreshing, somewhat different, more entrepreneurial.”

While each regional accreditation agency has its particular requirements, generally accreditation involves self-study and peer-review processes to verify, most basically, that an institution is capable of achieving its stated mission. For the NCA at the time of JIU’s application, higher education institutions were required to meet the following five criteria:

1) The institution has clear and publicly stated purposes consistent with its mission and appropriate to an institution of higher education.
2) The institution has effectively organized human, financial, and physical resources to accomplish its purpose.
3) The institution is accomplishing its education and other purposes.
4) The institution can continue to accomplish its purposes and strengthen its educational effectiveness.
5) The institution demonstrates integrity in its practices and relationships.

The NCA’s self-study process generally begins about two years before the comprehensive, peer-review visit by an accreditation team. The self-study focuses on evaluating, rather than describing, the institution as a whole by involving a wide-range of constituents, in order to “identify the institution’s strengths and areas that need improvement.” After the self-study report is completed, the peer review process begins. Site visits by “consultant-evaluators” are one of the central components of the peer-review process. This team receives the institution’s self-study report and other data to prepare for these two three-day visits, which entail conducting interviews with various constituencies – including board members, executive officers and faculty – sitting in on classes, and reviewing financial audits. The team then submits a written report to the Accreditation Review Council. After the Accreditation Review Council approves the written report (sometimes after asking for additional investigation), the 15-person Commission on Institutions of Higher Education votes whether or not the institution should be accredited.

According to Steven Crow, Executive Director of the NCA from 1997 until 2008, the only unusual aspect of the process for JIU was that consultant-evaluators spent a significant amount of time online, rather than on campus, to review the curriculum and conduct interviews. In fact, one of the complaints about the evaluation process was that several members of the peer-review team came with expertise in online education, rather than expertise in business communication as taught in a traditional setting. The peer-review team expressed concerned about academic resources and faculty but focused even more attention on JIU’s prospects for financial viability without the support of Jones International, Ltd., the enterprise providing start-up capital. (At the time, JIU was losing money and planned to continue operating at a loss until 2001.) According to Crow and Commission member Peg Lee, there were conversations prior to the vote about how the decision would affect the credibility of the NCA, as well as concerns about faculty presence and adequate library resources. However, the Commission was informally bound by the decisions made in previous steps of the candidacy, both the peer-review process and face-to-face interviews.

26 Author’s conversation with James Perley, 10/23/2008.
28 Author’s conversation with Steven Crow, 10/22/2008, and Jones, “Accrediting.”
Crow argued that the accreditation of NTU set the precedent for accrediting JIU. NTU had already “unbundled” courses, in that the courses’ designers were not the same faculty as those who taught them, and it didn’t have an actual campus or library, or substantial numbers of faculty. In 1984, NTU was created to allow engineers dispersed throughout the country to pursue master’s degrees by utilizing satellite technology. The courses taught through NTU were developed by top engineering schools and bought or leased by NTU for distribution to corporations sponsoring the education for their engineers. Ted Manning, who at the time served as the Executive Director of the NCA, was very supportive of NTU. After he retired from the NCA, he served in an advisory capacity for JIU as it began to incorporate and seek accreditation, and for a brief time he also served as the University’s president. The accreditation of NTU, however, did not receive the media attention nor the expression of concern from AAUP or other faculty bodies largely because NTU wasn’t touting its accreditation as a marketing tool.

**Reaction to JIU’s Accreditation**

In March of 1999, the Commission voted unanimously to accredit JIU. By mid-March, there were vociferous protests against the decision. The controversy was picked up in a number of prominent press outlets, including the Chicago Tribune and The New York Times. Journals covering academia were abuzz with stories about the decision. The publicity and controversy surrounding the decision was a surprise to Crow, who stated that “had it not been for the Jones decision to market the accreditation and make a big splash, there would not have been such a large controversy.”

One of the most prominent critics of the decision was the American Association of University Professors, the AAUP. The AAUP’s purpose is to “to advance academic freedom and shared governance, to define fundamental professional values and standards for higher education, and to ensure higher education’s contribution to the greater good.” Founded in 1915, partially in reaction to a prominent economist being fired at the request of Mrs. Leland Stanford at Stanford University, the association is known for its lobbying and advocacy for academic freedom and its support of collective bargaining efforts by faculty members on issues surrounding tenure, full-time faculty positions, and pay and benefits. In 1999, the AAUP had 43,000 faculty members from across the United States and was recognized as playing an important role in shaping the context of higher education.

James Perley, the chair of the AAUP’s Committee on Accreditation wrote to Steven Crow describing the AAUP’s reaction to JIU’s accreditation:

> By all public accounts, this virtual institution [JIU] presents a very weak case for accreditation. Indeed, it embodies most of our major worries about the denigration of quality that will follow the inexorable march toward online education . . . [O]nly a truly remarkable program could duplicate in a virtual world the mind-expanding experiences of a student on a university campus.

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29 Author’s conversation with Steven Crow, 10/22/2008.
30 Pease, “Jones,” p. 117.
31 Author’s conversation with Steven Crow, 10/22/2008.
34 The appendices include three letters exchanged between Perley and Crow between March 1999 and July 1999.
Perley had served as the president of the AAUP from 1994 to 1998 and then chaired the Committee on Accreditation from 1998 until June 2008. In the year prior to JIU’s accreditation, the AAUP successfully led a campaign opposing the establishment of a significant administrative and classroom presence in New Jersey by the University of Phoenix. Ultimately the AAUP’s criticism of JIU’s accreditation focused on three primary areas of concern: lack of full-time faculty involved with curriculum development and delivery, student assessment, and peer evaluation; lack of faculty governance; and limited library resources.

In the midst of this uproar, JIU president Pamela Pease responded with a letter to the editor of Academe, the AAUP’s bi-monthly publication, encouraging AAUP members to contact JIU directly with concerns and assuring them that the university had an interest in ensuring high quality online higher education:

> Our university shares the AAUP’s concern that online universities provide quality education. While JIU had the opportunity to seek other forms of certification or accreditation, we sought out the peer review process mandated by the regional accrediting agencies. Our intent was clear from the outset: prospective students need to know that they are receiving the same, or better, quality of education from an online program as would be received from a traditional one.  

Why should tenured faculty at large, established, well-endowed universities be concerned with the accreditation of a small university with fewer than 100 enrolled students that offered only two degrees? What was at stake? In part, it seems competing definitions of higher education were exposed, as was the challenge of how to regulate it.

### What is “Higher Education,” Anyway? And is it Possible to Measure its Quality?

Perhaps the conversation over JIU’s accreditation was most deeply a debate about what defines higher education. Much of this debate took place in the pages and on the website of The Chronicle of Higher Education, the leading higher education news weekly. The Chronicle hosted an online colloquy featuring two members of the AAUP’s Committee on Accreditation, James Perley and Denise Tanguay, along with Steven Crow. In the colloquy, Perley and Tanguay suggested the following in describing the nature of higher education:

> Three major features have characterized higher education in this country, have insured its quality, and have established its pre-eminent position in the world. Those features are what distinguishes higher education from other postsecondary endeavors, such as corporate training centers, proprietary trade schools, and continuing adult-education courses that do not lead to a degree. The three defining features are: a guarantee of academic freedom; the existence of a functioning system of collegial governance; and the presence of a group of scholars and students engaged not only in teaching and learning, but also in advancing the frontiers of knowledge.

At the end of the discussion, Perley and Tanguay concluded: “We may need to re-examine the fundamental meaning of accreditation and the standards applied by accrediting agencies to insure that what passes for higher education today and tomorrow really is higher education.”

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57 Ibid.
58 In a later conversation with Perley, he suggested that it would be ideal to have two accrediting systems: one for traditional higher education and one for online education, but acknowledged that the difficulty with that idea is that many traditional universities have substantial online programs.
Another voice skeptical of the JIU accreditation, David Noble, a critic of the commercialization of higher education stated, “I don’t have problems with an institution that says, ‘We do technical training.’ But they shouldn’t call themselves a college or university.” Noble expanded upon this delineation between training and education:

[T]raining involves the honing of a person’s mind so that his or her mind can be used for the purposes of someone other than that person. Training thus typically entails a radical divorce between knowledge and the self . . . Education is the exact opposite of training in that it entails not the disassociation but the utter integration of knowledge and the self, in a word, self-knowledge.

Clearly elements of Noble’s definition stand in opposition to the mission and goals of institutions like the University of Phoenix and JIU, which intend to help working adults advance their careers. Carol Twigg, in her paper on the National Learning Infrastructure Initiative, suggested that the “new majority” of adults seeking post-high school education adopted a consumer mentality and measured quality within that paradigm. Traditional measures of higher education quality like student-teacher ratio, library size, and grants won by faculty were largely irrelevant to this new majority. But many in higher education, including James Perley, tended to classify specific career-oriented training as being vocational education instead of higher education, both of which, he argued, are critical to the nation’s well-being.

As sociologist David Jaffee pointed out, whatever the definition, mission, or goals of higher education are, there is growing pressure for organizations to clarify goals and demonstrate effective goal attainment and accountability to external regulating bodies and constituencies. As this applies to higher education, and as the struggle over outcomes assessment has clearly demonstrated, there are great difficulties establishing a consensus over educational goals, or the means to measure them.

So how are accreditation agencies supposed to uphold ambiguous standards regarding what constitutes higher education? How do they decide what counts as “quality”? Going back to the NCA’s standards for accreditation, the first criterion states, “The institution has clear and publicly stated purposes consistent with its mission and appropriate to an institution of higher education.” What is an appropriate mission for an institution of higher education? At the time JIU sought accreditation, the NCA process suggested such appropriateness is determined by looking at peer institutions, whereas the AAUP felt faculty should be responsible for determining what suffices as higher education.

Another strand in the debate over JIU was whether or not the delivery mechanism – the Internet and its virtual environment – could be evaluated along the same criteria as traditional campuses. David Longanecker, former Assistant Secretary for Postsecondary Education at the U.S. Department of Education, stated, “This is going to be a serious issue for the next five years . . . It’s leading us to a very different concept of quality assurance than we’ve traditionally had – but I’m not sure what that is . . . Our concern is that old forms of accreditation really aren’t appropriate for the new delivery mechanisms.” And Steven Crow felt that much of the fury generated by the

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42 Author’s conversation with James Perley, 10/23/2008.
43 Jaffee, p. 29.
45 See Appendix A.
accreditation of JIU was due to general concerns about online education and its prominence as a mechanism for delivering continuing (as opposed to higher) education.

**Faculty Losing Control?**

Crow, however, also posited that the fundamental issue was not about accreditation quality but faculty control. He argued that:

> Online education has come to represent the shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered education . . . Faculty are central players in this shift even though many evidently fear that it threatens to marginalize them. To be sure, they may no longer be as autonomous as they once were, for effective use of expensive technology requires teamwork and collaboration in many cases. Nevertheless, rigorous higher education must be based on the knowledge defined by content specialists and generalists, and effective education will continue to require the talents of facilitators who understand and can enhance learning. These are and will continue to be faculty roles.47

When JIU was accredited, it had 2 full-time faculty members on staff and 54 part-timers.48 These faculty members had the primary responsibility of ensuring that online course facilitators were effective at teaching in a virtual setting. JIU worked with “content experts,” often full-time faculty members at other schools, to design the courses that would then be delivered online by facilitators. Full-time faculty at the University had very different job descriptions than faculty at traditional schools: there weren’t research requirements or expectations, they had little control over course design because this function was fulfilled by contracted content experts, and they had little input regarding JIU’s governance.

One of the central symbols in the debate was the role of the faculty and the space (virtual or otherwise) in which they teach. Unlike the University of Phoenix, which at the time had about ten percent of its classes online, Jones International University only conducted classes virtually; there were no classrooms. Reflecting on the association between the physical space of the classroom and faculty roles, sociologist David Jaffee wrote:

> The classroom institution has historically centralized power and influence in the hands of the instructor. When faculty walk into the classroom the learning begins; faculty are the source of knowledge; faculty communicate information and influence the students; faculty determine what will be taught, who will speak and when; faculty determine the correct or incorrect answer; and faculty determine when it is time to “stop learning” and leave the classroom.49

This model of faculty teaching has colloquially been called “sage on the stage,” and it contrasts with the “guide on the side” approach, in which faculty facilitate class discussion and support students in constructing knowledge rather than absorbing information. Carol Twigg suggested that the “sage on the stage” model was only possible because of the relative homogeneity of student populations and the narrow accessibility of higher education. Colonial colleges had a mission of preparing civic leaders with shared values; land-grant universities made higher education more

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48 Kriger, Thomas J. and Scheuerman, William E. “Edubusiness Comes to the Academy: The Virtual University and the Threat to Academic Labor” in Working USA, Fall 2000. p. 49.
accessible, but access was still limited.\textsuperscript{50} The classroom is an “old technology” that often didn’t meet the needs of the new majority of students seeking higher education, she argued.

We are seeing dramatic changes in who is learning. Only 43 percent of the nation’s undergraduates are under the age of 25 and attending a four-year college on full-time basis . . . Adult students, who are primarily part-time and non-residential, now make up higher education’s “New Majority.”\textsuperscript{51}

It is unclear that this demographic would resonate with Thomas Kriger’s view that “Students attend college to learn, and they lack the knowledge and experience to always know what they want or need to learn.”\textsuperscript{52, 53} Older, working adults, now the largest demographic seeking post-secondary education, believe they know what they need to learn.

For the AAUP, the unbundling of course development and teaching was a significant problem with the online education model that JIU and other universities used. Perley cited several concerns about how unbundling can negatively impact the quality of education offered:

- The faculty who facilitate or teach the course are often less competent in the subject matter than those who design the course.
- The feedback loop between faculty and students is compromised. The course designer doesn’t have the opportunity to improvise and modify as the course progresses. And the faculty facilitator is often restricted from modifying the course to meet the observed student need.
- The students are evaluated and assessed by faculty who may be less competent in the subject matter and who often don’t have the flexibility to modify the evaluation based on the actual teaching experience.

Further, Perley noted that faculty teaching unbundled courses are often paid very little, even to the point of being exploited for their labor.\textsuperscript{54}

Crow, on the other hand, argued that much of the negative response from faculty groups was about “guild protection,” that is, that faculty wish to shield their status, salary range, and benefits from being challenged by other employment models. He concurred with Perley that faculty should ultimately be responsible for designing a curriculum and assessing whether students are learning; however, he didn’t believe these tasks needed to be completed by a single faculty member. He argued that having more than one faculty member involved with course design and student assessment creates a system of checks and balances.\textsuperscript{55} And he acknowledged that one of the challenges is figuring out what to fix when the student isn’t learning: Is it the teaching or mentoring or is it the curriculum itself?

\textsuperscript{50} Colonial colleges were those founded prior to the United States gaining independence. Land-grant colleges and universities were founded in the mid-to-late 1800s using funds that the federal government gave to states for the explicit purpose of enlarging access to higher education which would emphasize non-liberal arts subjects such as engineering and agriculture.


\textsuperscript{52} Kriger, “Edubusiness,” p. 52.

\textsuperscript{53} Thomas Kriger served as the Research Director for both the American Federation of Teachers and the United University Professions, both teachers’ unions.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{54} Author’s conversation with the James Perley, 10/23/2008.

\textsuperscript{55} Author’s conversation with the Steven Crow, 10/22/2008.
Educating for a Democracy or Democratizing Education?

One of the NCA’s primary arguments in favor of accrediting JIU, besides the fact that the Commission determined the University met its criteria, was that JIU enhanced access to education. In an article defending the decision to accredit JIU, Crow wrote:

[T]he Commission’s accreditation of JIU was simply one in a long line of decisions about programs designed to enhance access to quality education . . . Traditionalists complained decades ago when normal schools became full-fledged members; later they argued against single purpose and professional schools; and they made dire forecasts when community and technical colleges were made members.56

In reflecting on the culture of the NCA, Crow remarked that the culture was shaped by the land-grant universities whose mission was to “get education to the people.” They tended to favor accessibility, particularly as their jurisdiction spread from West Virginia to Arizona. Crow also mentioned that state universities, even in the West, had insufficient incentives to motivate increasing educational access, especially for non-traditional students. For example, in some states off-campus students didn’t yield financial remuneration from the state government.57

But organizations representing faculty viewed this appeal to increasing access as a cover for allowing less rigorous curricula to suffice as higher education. Thomas Kriger, argued that under the guise of furthering the democratization of education, that great Jeffersonian revolution, the virtual university could become the occasion for its destruction. More than jobs are at stake. If this revolution is allowed to spread unchecked, the quality of American higher education will be at risk.58

For Kriger, it was essential that faculty protect the quality of higher education in service of the greater good of democracy:

College faculty must insist on sound practice based on a broad vision of education – one that recognizes education is about more than facts, more than competencies, more than career ambitions. Education, among other things, is about broadening intellectual horizons, relying on facts and reason when confronting life issues and learning to listen to others and defend ideas by the force of argument. That is why education is the foundation of a working democracy.59

James Perley stated that he was in favor of accessibility for students who live in remote areas, but “what you have to have is faculty who use the same standards for what they do online in northern Montana that you do in an institution where you sit in a seat . . . it is a quality assurance issue.”60

Are Corporate America and Higher Education Incompatible?

Another angle from which faculty unions were critical of the decision had to do with a perceived incommensurability of the profit-making ethos of corporate America and that of higher education. Kriger wrote:

56 Crow, “Accreditation” accessed 10/08/08.
57 Author’s conversation with Steven Crow, 10/22/2008.
58 Kriger, Thomas J. and Scheuerman, William E. “Edubusiness Comes to the Academy: The Virtual University and the Threat to Academic Labor” in Working USA, Fall 2000. p. 52.
59 Kriger, Thomas. “Virtual.”
60 Author’s conversation with James Perley, 10/23/2008.
Once education is driven by profit, profit takes the ascendency and education slips to a subordinate position. When profits and quality clash, quality usually suffers. But in today’s political environment – where far-right ideologues attack higher education as an oversized, ossified institution in search of students – the virtual university may begin to look like an inexpensive and democratic alternative. Should that happen, we all lose: students and faculty.”

Several traditional universities, both public and private, have taken great interest in providing online classes with the hope of generating profit. David Noble suggested that the primary reason for traditional universities to engage in technological development for online teaching was to benefit from the capitalization of the technology, not just the relatively meager income stream such programs might produce over longer term. Others skeptical of traditional universities offering online education feared that the drive for student enrollment and retention would trump the institution’s desire to maintain educational quality. Inevitably, quality standards of for-profit institutions are dependent upon the intelligence and work-ethic in the pool of likely applicants and students. So are profit motives incompatible with the mission of higher education? It appears to depend on whom you ask.

A Decade Later

The debate about online education and distance learning continues to simmer, though there haven’t been any significant flash-points recently. Organizations such as Educause, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, the Pew Charitable Trusts, and the U.S. Department of Education continue to put out policy papers and guidelines, hold conventions, and publish about the benefits and drawbacks to using the Internet as an education tool. For example:

- At their biennial convention in 2000, the American Federation of Teachers passed a “Resolution on Ensuring High Quality Distance Education,” which emphasized the need for faculty control over content and delivery, class sizes that allow for significant interaction between faculty and students, and access to adequate libraries and research opportunities for students.

- The number of distance education providers and accrediting bodies has grown significantly since 2000; however, the U.S. Department of Education officially recognizes 34 agencies that provide distance education, only 2 of which have been added since 1999.

- There has also been a significant expansion of online tools used in traditional classroom settings. As of September 2008, over 75 percent of colleges in the United States used course management software.

- Between 2002 and 2006, there was an average 21.5 percent annual growth rate in online education enrollment (that is, courses with over 80 percent of the instruction being delivered online), compared with an average 1.5 percent annual increase in higher education enrollments.

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61 Kriger, “Edubusiness,” p. 54.
62 Noble, Digital, p. 22.
63 The full-text can be found here: http://www.aft.org/about/resolutions/2000/distanceed.htm
According to a 2004 study completed by Educause, nearly half of the students who use take online courses are on-campus students, while the other half are distance learners.67

Resistance to online education from faculty remains strong according to the perception of chief academic officers surveyed by Sloan-C, a non-profit consortium funded largely by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, that works to ensure the quality online education:

Only one-in-three academic leaders (33 percent) currently believe their faculty “accept the value and legitimacy of online education.” There has been little change in acceptance over the course of the research (28 percent in 2002, 31 percent in 2004, and 28 percent in 2005).68

Concerns about quality are being addressed in numerous outlets including Quality Matters. Quality Matters is “a faculty-centered, peer review process designed to certify the quality of online courses and online components.” It was developed with support from a grant from the U.S. Department of Education and is now a self-sustaining organization that helps faculty develop online courses that will meet quality standards.69

Jones International University has expanded over the past nine years. In 2001, they were awarded a contract from the United Nations Development Program to create the Virtual Development Academy for mid-level managers providing consulting services. JIU designed and administered the program until 2005. Between 1999 and 2002, enrollment at JIU increased 300 percent; the University increased its number of degree programs from 2 to 20 by 2001, and then to 40 in 2003.70 In 2006, JIU entered into a partnership with the U.S. Air Force to help airmen with associate’s degrees from the Community College of the Air Force earn a baccalaureate degree through JIU administered coursework.

The role of accreditation agencies remains a topic of vibrant discussion. The NCA’s Higher Education Commission,71 like other regional accrediting bodies, has come under some scrutiny in light of increasing demands for accountability and transparency from the U.S. Department of Education and the public. Within two years after the accreditation of JIU, the NCA revised its accreditation criteria, and James Perley served on the revising committee.72 Steven Crow reflected that the publicity directly led to the revision of the NCA’s standards:

We came so close to the edge and stretching concepts that were built around a traditional concept of a college to fit this place, that part of the public attack struck home . . . [W]e moved on to a standard revision that really allowed us to be much more open and flexible in the case of what technology was doing to the face of higher education. I think you’ll find that across the board in every region.

The NCA’s willingness to work with policy makers to think through accountability structures and transparency in the accreditation process has drawn criticism from some in academia who are fearful that academic freedom and the confidentiality between accrediting bodies and their member institutions will be sacrificed. The NCA recognizes the changing landscape and seeks to be an active participant in shaping accreditation standards and privileges in the future:

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68 Ibid., p. 18 f.
70 Pease, Pamela. “Jones” p. 119f.
72 Author’s conversation with James Perley, 10/23/2008.
In light of the dissolution of borders that once defined the campus and the region, significant questions about the relevance of regional accreditation emerge.

Some question whether the peer review processes that are fundamental to regional accreditation meet the challenge of providing effective quality assurance for the increasingly complex operations of contemporary colleges and universities. Some also question the capacity of regional accreditation to evaluate effectively the new financial configurations marking higher education: collaboration within a highly competitive marketplace, privatization within the public and independent sectors, and the growth of the for-profit sector in serving the common good either through partnering or delivering education through accredited institutions. None of these challenges have easy answers or solutions.73

Conclusions

The accreditation of Jones International University served as a catalyst to bring into the public sphere ongoing conversations about the definition and purpose of higher education, the way new technologies affect how communication and learning happen, and the role of corporations in higher education. In higher education, where there is no single regulatory body or clear authority structure, debates about these issues inevitably linger, and perhaps there is no need to resolve them. However, questions about purpose, quality, control, and mission likely won’t go away if recent demographic trends continue. As of 2008, two of the five colleges with the highest enrollment were solely online ventures: University of Phoenix Online Campus, with 117,309 students, and Western International University, with 50,663 students.74

73 Cited from President’s profile on the NCA’s website: http://www.ncahlc.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=252&Itemid=229
74 From the National Center for Education Statistics, 2007. Accessed online at http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d07/ch_3.asp 9/22/08. The other three colleges in the top-five are: Miami-Dade College, with 54,169 students; Arizona State University in Tempe, with 51,612; and University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, with 51,175 students.
Appendices

B: Letter from James Perley, of the AAUP, to Steven Crow, of the NCA, on 3/19/1999
C: Letter from Steven Crow to James Perley on 3/29/1999
D: Draft of response letter from James Perley to Steven Crow on 7/2/1999

The author would like to thank Dr. James Perley and Susan Van Kollenburg of the NCA for help in compiling these appendices.
Appendix A: The North Central Association’s Handbook for Accreditation

Chapter 4. The Criteria for Accreditation

Criterion Five

“The institution demonstrates integrity in its practices and relationships.”

In determining appropriate patterns of evidence for Criterion Five, the Commission considers evidence such as:

a. student, faculty, and staff handbooks that describe various institutional relationships with those constituencies, including appropriate grievance procedures.

b. policies and practices for the resolution of internal disputes within the institution’s constituency.

c. policies and practices consistent with its mission related to equity of treatment, nondiscrimination, affirmative action, and other means of enhancing access to education and the building of a diverse educational community.

d. institutional publications, statements, and advertising that describe accurately and fairly the institution, its operations, and its programs.

e. relationships with other institutions of higher education conducted ethically and responsibly.

f. appropriate support for resources shared with other institutions.

g. policies and procedures regarding institutional relationships with and responsibility for intercollegiate athletics, student associations, and subsidiary or related business enterprises.

h. oversight processes for monitoring contractual arrangements with government, industry, and other organizations.
Appendix B: Letter from James Perley to Steven Crow on 3/19/1999

March 19, 1999

Dr. Steven D. Crow  
Executive Director  
North Central Association of Colleges and Schools  
Commission on Institutions of Higher Education  
30 North LaSalle Street, Suite 2400  
Chicago, Illinois 60602-2504

Dear Dr. Crow:

I am writing to you as chair of the AAUPs Committee on Accrediting of Colleges and Universities to express our shock and dismay at the reported action of the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education in accrediting Jones International University.

By all public accounts, this virtual institution presents a very weak case for accreditation. Indeed it embodies most of our major worries about the denigration of quality that could follow this apparently inexorable march toward on-line education.

Like the Commission, AAUP committees have been studying distance education and quality issues very closely. We certainly acknowledge the change that is taking place all around us; many of our members are exploring with great enthusiasm the many new ways of teaching and research that are possible with the new communications technologies.

Our concern in this time of transformation -- similar to that of most accreditors -- has been to preserve the special qualities that have come to characterize higher education in this country. While these qualities seem stubbornly to elude attempts at precise definition, they are reflected well in the Commission's own mission statement, general institutional requirements, and criteria for accreditation.

A commitment to the continued high quality of higher education in this country does not necessarily conflict with the possibility that college-level courses might be taken on-line. It may, however, exclude the concept of a bachelor's or master's degree obtained completely on-line. Only a truly remarkable program could duplicate in a virtual world the mind-expanding experiences of a student on a university campus. A bachelor's degree from an accredited college or university in this country should indicate something to the world; we believe that it should certify the completion of a varied educational program, characterized by rigor and high standards.
which has required the student to reason and analyze and has emphasized the ability to think critically.

As you know, these are the very issues that institutional administrations and faculty -- and indeed, accreditation agencies -- are wrestling with right now. Accrediting bodies are uniquely situated to offer their leadership as we find our way through the changes that are coming so rapidly to higher education. You can imagine our disappointment to find that, in the case of Jones International University, the Commission seems to have set aside many of its own carefully drawn criteria, to accredit this completely on-line university.

1. Two Full-time Faculty? The Commission's "General Institutional Requirement #10" requires that a "sufficient number of the faculty are full-time employees of the institution." Two? While the Commission is wise not to prescribe a specific number or proportion of full-time faculty, clearly the Commission's standards imply a reasonable balance of faculty who are invested in the academic program of the institution, and who guide and shape the entire curriculum, set standards for assessment of students, and mutually maintain the quality of teaching and scholarship among their faculty peers. Without a reasonable balance, it is the administrators (or owners) who make these academic decisions for the institution. While their decisions might be based on a number of factors, including marketability, cost, and industry requirements, they are not likely to be based on scholarship or on maintaining the quality of higher education in this country.

To require as few as two full-time faculty members for a curriculum of 36 courses -- with new class sections starting every month -- indicates that the Commission places little value on the availability of faculty to serve as mentors and teachers to their students. Interaction with full-time faculty, whether on-line or in the classroom, is an essential feature of a quality education. We would have hoped that the Commission would have valued more highly the interaction between student and teacher, and would have seen such interaction as an essential element of higher education.

2. A Degree-granting Institution? The Commission's "General Institutional Requirement #13" requires that the institution have students enrolled in degree programs. With less than 8% of its student body seeking a degree of any kind, this institution has established the true minimum number of degrees (one) and recruited a few students to pursue that degree. But 92% of the classes at this institution are taken by students seeking certificates or simply taking a few courses. Continuing education (or training) of adults is certainly a marketable service -- but is it the same thing as accredited higher education?

3. Research Supports? The Commission's "General Institutional Requirement #18" requires that the institution provide access for students to "learning resources and support services." And the Commission's second Criterion for Accreditation calls for "libraries, . . . learning resource centers, laboratories and studios . . . adequate to support the institution's purposes." This
institution is supported by access to an on-line reference librarian, clearly no substitute for exploring a university library on one's own.

4. Academic Freedom? The Commission's first Criterion for Accreditation calls for "support for freedom of inquiry" for faculty and students. Yet this institution's program consists of pre-packaged courses designed by "content experts" and delivered by others. How is academic freedom -- for either students or faculty -- preserved?

5. Shared Governance? The Commission's second Criterion for Accreditation calls for systems of governance that "provide dependable information to the institution's constituencies and, as appropriate, involve them in the decision-making processes. How are faculty to be involved in decision-making processes about curriculum and academic standards when less than 4% of the faculty is employed full time by the institution?

6. Appropriate level of education? The Commission's third Criterion for Accreditation seeks evidence that the institution offers "educational programs appropriate to an institution of higher education." An on-line university will be particularly challenged to meet the third and fourth points under this criterion:

   "programs that require of the faculty and students (as appropriate to the level of the educational program) the use of scholarship and/or the participation in research as part of the programs;

   "programs that require intellectual interaction between student and faculty and encourage it between student and student."

A review of the course descriptions posted by Jones International University on its web site leaves the disappointing impression that the courses offered by this institution lack substance. These offerings make a sad statement about the meaning of courses, as they have been envisioned traditionally in the college and university environment. Their brevity (one hour/week for eight weeks) underscores the institution's disregard for depth of inquiry and quality of education. By granting accreditation, the Commission dilutes the standards defining a college-level course.

To accredit an institution like Jones International University as an institution of higher education weakens the very definition of higher education. It welcomes a new category of educational institutions -- those which lack a research component and feature industry-oriented skills training -- to the benefits of accreditation as a higher education institution. Validating such institutions as places of higher learning dilutes the meaning of accreditation and may well lead to a weakening of the scholarship/research component that has always characterized the exemplary system of higher education in the U.S.
7. Measuring and assuring quality. Many accrediting agencies speak of moving beyond the traditional "input measures," such as number and qualifications of faculty, availability of library and research facilities, etc. Typically the intention is to substitute "outcome measures," measures of knowledge and skill gained through the educational programs. Jones International University has clearly eschewed the tradition "inputs" to education. There is no current agreement in the higher education sector with regard to appropriate outcome measures, and apparently the accreditation team did not demand evidence of such measures. Therefore, all that is left to assure quality is a close examination of the educational processes that this institution employs. Since these processes -- e.g., vast surveys of material on human cultures in asynchronous, condensed (8-week) on-line presentations -- are new to higher education, it seems incumbent on the candidate institution to establish that its processes are as effective in transmitting and evoking knowledge about, say, Western civilization, as traditional campus-based programs. We are surprised that the Commission proceeded to accredit this institution's programs without such evidence established.

On behalf of the AAUP's Committee on Accrediting of Colleges and Universities, I must express to you the sense of our members that the Commission's decision to accredit Jones International University does a disservice to the North Central Association and to accreditation in higher education generally. It reinforces for us our commitment to examine carefully the accreditation processes and standards that are now in effect and, in particular, their application to distance education.

We hope that the result of this particular accreditation process was an aberration rather than a portent of things to come. In view of the many questions about this accreditation raised by your own requirements and criteria, we urge the Commission give further consideration to the positions that it is reported to have taken in this case. We would welcome your comments.

Sincerely,

Dr. James Perley, Chair
Committee on Accrediting of Colleges and Universities
American Association of University Professors
Appendix C: Letter from Steven Crow to James Perley on 3/29/1999

March 29, 1999

Dr. James Perley, Chair
Committee on Accrediting of Colleges and Universities
American Association of University Professors
1012 Fourteenth Street, N.W., Suite 500
Washington, D.C. 20005-3465

Dear Dr. Perley:

Thank you for your letter of 19 March in which, on behalf of the Committee on Accrediting of Colleges and Universities, you express dismay at the Commission’s recent decision to accredit Jones International University. While I am sorry that you chose to distribute the letter before giving me the opportunity to respond, I welcome the invitation you provide to comment on your Committee’s interpretations of Commission requirements and criteria and the adequacy by which they have been applied to Jones International University.

As you and your colleagues know, Jones International University (JIU) is not the first accredited institution to offer complete degree programs on-line. A number of traditional institutions have already initiated such programs. Your strong reservations about the effectiveness of on-line education to duplicate the “mind-expanding experience of a student on a university campus” are limited to JIU, but I have not received from you criticism of the Commission’s extension of accreditation of several “traditional” colleges and universities to include their on-line degree programs.

Even as it responds to new and changing institutional configurations through which opportunities for learning are provided students, the Commission would agree that it should expect higher education degrees to testify to “completion of a varied education program, characterized by rigor and high standards, which has required the student to reason and analyze and has emphasized the ability to think critically.” Your apparent disagreement with the Commission, therefore, is not over ends but over means. I appreciate your sense that the two cannot be easily disentangled, and I assure you that the Board of Trustees has moved with care and thoughtfulness as it responds to many in the higher education community who argue that such disentanglement is both possible and in some situations beneficial.

I am not going to use this letter to describe Jones International University, for it is quite capable of providing that description to any who choose to move beyond journalistic summaries of it. However, I want to speak directly to your interpretation of the Commission’s requirements and criteria.
Full-time faculty. The Commission's requirement for the adequacy of full-time faculty provides a fairly simple threshold number: at least one for each degree program. Obviously, JIU meets that threshold for at present it offers only two programs. JIU, by the way, must return to the Commission to seek extension of accreditation to any new degree programs, thus allowing some monitoring of the growth of full-time faculty. But you appear to assume that “availability of faculty to serve as mentors and teachers of their students” is directly tied to the full-time status of those who serve as mentors and teachers. Moreover, you appear to assume that protection of integrity of the curriculum can only be assured by full-time faculty. JIU does provide an alternative model of faculty roles, one that “unbundles” various faculty responsibilities and places them in the hands of different groups, all of which involve appropriately credentialed and experienced faculty, but each charged with fulfilling portions of the total faculty responsibility. For example, I think you will find JIU’s curriculum experts to be some of the leading scholars and teachers in the field. They create a curriculum and also oversee its effectiveness and currency. This also speaks to your concern about shared governance, for faculty, not administrators, protect the integrity of the academic programs.

Degree-granting. Again the Commission’s requirement is for threshold purposes. JIU grants degrees. But you correctly wonder whether JIU’s focus is on those degree programs rather than other educational activities. Since accreditation is frequently a minimal threshold for students looking at a new institution, it is not unusual for a new institution to have fewer students admitted to degree programs than taking courses or groupings of courses. Only JIU can tell you how much its certificate offerings differ from the JIU courses taken by degree-seeking students, but I rather imagine that its current courses—grouped as those of many institutions into smaller packages of expertise—are largely from its degree programs.

Learning resources and support services. On-line education, as with many varieties of distance education, does require special attention to the quality of the learning resources and support services provided to students. Interestingly enough, an institution with the primary goal of delivering on-line education frequently pays better attention to this challenge than do our traditional institutions that attempt to make campus-based services extend to new environments. While we might disagree on how students benefit from current libraries (particularly those with closed stacks), the internet is probably one of the largest, most varied collection of resources around. JIU can best explain how it helps a student understand and maneuver that collection and how it
supports a student when access to extra print resources might be most advantageous.

**Academic Freedom.** You appear to interpret academic freedom solely in the framework of one faculty member's freedom to create, deliver, and evaluate courses and their effectiveness for students. I had always understood academic freedom to be intimately connected with the faculty role in determining curricula, in assuring free expression of ideas by faculty and students, and in assuring both the freedom of inquiry. I know nothing that JIU does to invalidate that understanding.

**Appropriate level of education.** JIU has had to work hard to convince visiting evaluation teams that its programs and courses are well-conceived and appropriately rigorous. If JIU degree programs were remarkably different in content and rigor from similar programs offered by other accredited colleges and universities, then your criticism might be valid. I would urge that, rather than condemning the institution, you do what the evaluation team did: interact with students and faculty, not just read on-line catalog copy.

**Measuring and assuring quality.** You are quite right in noting that "there is no current agreement in the higher education sector with regard to appropriate outcome measures," a comment as confessional as accurate. Many efforts by the accrediting community to stimulate that agreement have been met with institutional and faculty objections. For years non-traditional institutions have borne the burden of providing evidence of achieved learning that traditional institutions find difficult to provide. Benchmarking achievement in such an environment is a worthy goal, but it increasingly cuts in both directions. We might disagree on the weight of the evidence given by the team and the Board of Trustees, but it is inaccurate and unfair to claim that the decision was not based on evaluation of the learning achieved by students.

I assure you that the Board of Trustees will receive your letter together with this response, and I will convey to you any further comments it might choose to make. Since I do not know the distribution you made of your letter to the Commission, I trust you will make a copy of this response available to all who received your letter.

Writing now only as the Executive Director, I am disappointed that your Committee has reached the conclusions you have expressed. For an organization concerned about the importance of research and academic freedom, you appear to have made extraordinarily strong judgments—both about JIU and about the Commission—that you chose to share publicly without much careful research or openness to some who believe—and have research evidence to support those beliefs—that the quality higher education found in
many of our classrooms can also be found in distance education, including on-line education.

I very much welcome the opportunity for further discussion. We are clearly in a period of significant change in higher education, and all of us concerned about quality and academic freedom must share in charting that new future. That discussion is imperative, for I believe that the Board of Trustees exercised a good—not aberrant—judgment, and in so doing, signaled its willingness to be responsive to the growing diversity within higher education in the future. If you agree that face-to-face conversation is valuable, I will try to schedule within the next few months an opportunity for you and others you wish to include to meet with me, members of the staff, and, if available, some members of the Board.

Sincerely,

Steven D. Crow
Executive Director
Appendix D: Draft of response letter from James Perley to Steven Crow on 7/2/1999

Ruth Flower, 7/1/99 1:43 PM -0400, final draft of Jones Letter

Date: Thu, 01 Jul 1999 13:43:35 -0400
From: Ruth Flower <rflower@aaup.org>
Subject: final draft of Jones Letter
Sender: owner-commd@aaup.org
X-Sender: rflower@aaup.org [Unverified]
To: Multiple recipients of list commd <commd@aaup.org>
Reply-To: Commd <commd@aaup.org>
MIME-Version: 1.0

I say "final draft" hopefully.

The letter has been re-written to emphasize the unbundling concept. The
governance points are still there, but our argument does not rest on
them.
{You'll be pleased to see, Jim W., that this means that we do not have to
concede that a well-run [governed] institution CAN do total on-line
degrees.
This draft now says -- it depends how you do the courses.

Denise -- I need to be clear about the "asking for information" point.
Did
you contact Jones, or was it just NCA? If just NCA, we'll need to modify
that point.

And for everyone (especially Jim P.) -- is OK? Shall we go with it?

Ruth

July 2, 1999

Dr. Steven Crow
Executive Director
North Central Association of Colleges and Schools
Commission on Institutions of Higher Education
30 North LaSalle Street, Suite 2400
Chicago, Illinois  60602-2504

Dear Dr. Crow:

We wrote to you in March expressing our concern with the
accreditation of
Jones International University. We appreciate your prompt and detailed
response; we would now like to continue that conversation.

Earlier this month at the annual meeting of AAUP, we adopted the
enclosed
policy statement on distance education. You will see that it recognizes a number ways in which on-line technologies add to the educational process. Many faculty members, for example, use a "web caucus" with regular courses to initiate and guide student discussion. Faculty members also make use of materials on government and other websites, directing their students to these resources, and then asking for comments on the usefulness of the information for the topic being studied. The statement encourages the thoughtful use of the technological aids in classroom teaching, and it outlines some standards for the teaching of on-line courses.

Our committee on Accrediting of Colleges and Universities also met recently and discussed the matter of Jones International University. We acknowledge that our information is limited. You wrote that JIU is quite capable of describing itself, but JIU was not responsive to a request by a member of our committee for information. [check w/ Denise for specifics] Accordingly, we have so far based our comments on published accounts.

Our committee specifically considered the accrediting of on-line courses and programs offered by traditional colleges and universities, as well as the accrediting of completely on-line institutions. We realized that at issue here is the integrity of the teaching/learning process at the higher education level. We concluded that, for many courses, qualified faculty could make use of on-line technologies to teach entire courses without diminishing the quality of teaching or compromising the learning experience to unacceptable levels. If thoughtfully designed and carried out by a qualified faculty member, it is at least possible for on-line courses to incorporate most elements available in the traditional classroom. Oversight by an active faculty body would be the best way to ensure an acceptable proportion of distance courses for a specific degree program, the appropriate balance of specialized and general education courses, and adequate preparation for entry-level and advanced courses.

Modularized courses, on the other hand -- those designed by a "content expert" and conveyed as a package by another teacher -- are not equivalent to regular courses taught via electronic communications. These courses leave little or no room for the dynamic and creative qualities of higher education. Teachers provide and interpret course materials -- but do not create or modify them. Teachers "deliver" prepared content for student consumption but are given little opportunity to elicit new learning from students, or to pursue tangential topics outside the range of the outcome expectations. Teachers and students are rated by universal outcomes measures, providing strong incentives for teachers and students to "stick to...
the program" and to avoid irrelevant inquiries.

In contrast, higher education is a laboratory for inquiry -- whether or not the relevance of the question is apparent. New knowledge is born of new questions. And new questions can best be entertained and encouraged by faculty who are engaged not only in teaching, but in furthering research within their respective disciplines. We believe that a critical element of higher education is the opening of students' minds to questions that have not yet occurred -- in their own minds, in course materials, in lectures, or on tests.

"Unbundling" the course-creator from the teacher, the teacher from the student and the student from a campus disintegrates the experience of higher education into just some of its component parts. How do individual faculty members find ways in a standardized, pre-designed curriculum to add their own knowledge of content, of pedagogy, and of the needs of the students whom they teach? How do virtual institutions purport to contribute to the development of new theory and scholarship? What service do their faculty offer to the community? The "unbundled" parts do not make up a whole university education.

We also believe that students who never set foot on a campus miss an important aspect of higher education. Being on a campus is a rich learning experience in itself. Exposure -- even, or especially, accidental exposure -- to experiences in fields outside one's chosen program is an essential ingredient of higher education. These experiences contribute abundantly to the development of a truly educated mind.

Students may also lose access to the academic advising, informal counselling, tutoring, mentoring, and support services that would normally be available on a campus. The student at the far end of the on-line experiences is isolated; all "relationships" are virtual and confined to the cathode ray tube on his or her desk. Information may be transferred, but education must be experienced.

We rely heavily on oversight by faculty bodies to ensure both the breadth of study and the rigor and high standards that should characterize higher education programs. Since there is no agreement on outcomes measures, either in regard to their usefulness as to the standards that should apply, we believe that the process of active oversight by an engaged faculty of scholars is essential. This oversight goes beyond the production of
quality course materials; it should extend to a continuous review and refreshment of whole curricula by a diverse body of faculty acting together.

In many traditional institutions, the effectiveness of faculty governance is less than perfect, but the structure of the university presents faculty with the opportunity to see one another on a daily basis within their departments, to consult, question, and trade ideas, information, and opinions. Even where faculty governance structures are weak, this informal exchange serves to influence the quality and direction of course development in each department. A modularized structure omits this leavening and binding ingredient -- the "community of scholars."

In sum, we do not believe that a virtual institution offering modularized courses can provide an education that is equivalent to that provided in other higher education settings, and therefore we question the soundness of a decision to accredit such an institution by a regional accrediting agency for colleges and universities.

This is an important moment for higher education. We appreciate your willingness to continue this dialogue and to invite some members of the Board of Trustees to participate. If you would provide us with some information about the visiting team and its report, we would be better equipped for further conversation.

Please call or write at your convenience to discuss the meeting suggested with you, your staff, and some members of the Board of Trustees. I can be reached by telephone at 330-263-2556. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Dr. James E. Perley, Chair
Committee on Accrediting of Colleges and Universities
American Association of University Professors

Printed for Jim Perley <jperley@acs.wooster.edu>