Lessons from a Pre-Digital Age:
The Correspondence Education Movement

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."
—George Santayana

All discussion of distance education these days invariably turns into a discussion of technology, an endless meditation on the wonders of computer-mediated instruction. Identified with a revolution in technology, distance education has thereby assumed the aura of innovation and the appearance of a revolution itself, a bold departure from tradition, a signal step toward a preordained and radically transformed higher educational future. In the face of such a seemingly inexorable technology-driven destiny and the seductive enchantment of technological transcendence, skeptics are silenced and all questions are begged. But we pay a price for this technological fetishism that so dominates and delimits discussion. For it prevents us from perceiving the more fundamental significance of today's drive for distance education, which, at bottom, is not really about technology, nor is it anything new. We have been here before.

In essence, the current mania for distance education is about the commodification of higher education, of which computer technology is merely the latest medium, and it is, in reality, more a rerun than a revolution, bearing striking resemblance to a past today's enthusiasts barely know about or care to acknowledge, an earlier episode in the commodification of higher education known as correspondence instruction or, more quaintly, home study. Then as now, distance education has always been not so much technology-driven as profit-driven, whatever the mode of delivery. The common denominator linking the two episodes is not technology but the pursuit of profit in the guise and name of higher education. A careful examination of the earlier, pre-computer, episode in distance education enables us to place the..."
current mania not only in historical perspective but also in its proper politi-
cal-economic context. The chief aim here is to try to shift our attention from
technology to political economy, and from fantasies about the future to the far
more sobering lessons of the past.

Before proceeding with the historical analysis, it is important to spell out
what is meant by both education and commodification, since these terms are
often used with little precision. To begin with, education must be distin-
guished from training (which is arguably more suitable for distance delivery),
because the two are so often conflated. In essence, training involves the hon-
ing 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. Here knowledge is usually defined as
a set of skills or a body of information designed to be put to use, to become
operational, only in a context determined by someone other than the trained
person; in this context the assertion of self is not only counterproductive, it is
subversive to the enterprise. 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. Here knowledge is defined by and, in turn,
helps to define, the self. Knowledge and the knowledgeable person are basic-
cally inseparable.

Education is a process that necessarily entails an interpersonal (not mere-
ly interactive) relationship between people—student and teacher (and stu-
dent and student) that aims at individual and collective self-knowledge.
(Whenever people recall their educational experiences they tend to remember
above all not courses or subjects or the information imparted but people,
people who changed their minds or their lives, people who made a difference
in their developing sense of themselves. It is a sign of our current confusion
about education that we must be reminded of this obvious fact: that the rela-
tionship between people is central to the educational experience.) Education
is a process of becoming for all parties, based upon mutual recognition and
validation and centering upon the formation and evolution of identity. The
actual content of the educational experience is defined by this relationship
between people and the chief determinant of quality education is the estab-
ishment and enrichment of this relationship.

Like education, the word commodification (or commoditization) is used
rather loosely with regard to education and some precision might help the
discussion. A commodity is something created, grown, produced, or manu-
factured for exchange on the market. There are, of course, some things that
are bought and sold on the market that were not created for that purpose,
such as “labor” and “land”—what the political economist Karl Polanyi referred
to as “fictitious commodities.” Most educational offerings, although divided
into units of credit and exchanged for tuition, are fictitious commodities in
that they are not created by the educator strictly with this purpose in mind.
Here we will be using the term commodity, not in this fictitious, more expan-
sive, sense but rather in its classical, restricted sense, to mean something
expressly created for market exchange. The commodification of higher edu-
cation, then, refers to the deliberate transformation of the educational process
into commodity form, for the purpose of commercial transaction.

The commodification of education requires the interruption of this fund-
damental educational process and the disintegration and distillation of the
educational experience into discrete, reified, and ultimately saleable things or
packages of things. In the first step toward commodification, attention is
shifted from the experience of the people involved in the educational process
to the production and inventorying of an assortment of fragmented “course
materials”: syllabi, lectures, lessons, exams (now referred to in the aggregate
as “content”). As anyone familiar with higher education knows, these com-
mon instruments of instruction barely reflect what actually takes place in the
educational experience, and lend an illusion of order and predictability to
what is, at its best, an essentially unscripted and undetermined process.
Second, these fragments are removed or “alienated” from their original con-
text, the actual educational process itself, and from their producers, the teach-
ers, and are assembled as “courses,” which take on an existence independent
of and apart from those who created and gave flesh to them. This is perhaps
the most critical step in commodity formation. The alienation of ownership
of and control over course material (through surrender of copyright) is cru-
cial to this step. Finally, the assembled “courses” are exchanged for a profit on
the market, which determines their value, by their “owners,” who may or may
not have any relationship to the original creators and participants in the edu-
cational process. At the expense of the original integrity of the educational
process, instruction has here been transformed into a set of deliverable com-
modities, and the end of education has become not self-knowledge but the
making of money. In the wake of this transformation, teachers become com-
modity producers and deliverers, subject to the familiar regime of commodi-
ty production in any other industry, and students become consumers of yet
more commodities. The relationship between teacher and student is thus reestablished, in an alienated mode, through the medium of the market, and the buying and selling of commodities takes on the appearance of education. But it is, in reality, only a shadow of education, an assemblage of pieces without the whole.

Again, under this new regime, painfully familiar to skilled workers in every industry since the dawn of industrial capitalism, educators confront the harsh realities of commodity production: speedup, routinization of work, greater work discipline and managerial supervision, reduced autonomy, job insecurity, employer appropriation of the fruits of their labor, and, above all, the insistent managerial pressures to reduce labor costs in order to turn a profit. Thus, the commoditization of instruction leads invariably to the "proletarianization" or, more politely, the "deprofessionalization" of the professoriate. (As investors shift their focus from health care to education, the deprofessionalization experienced by physicians is being extended to professors, who now face what some Wall Street spokesmen are already calling EMOs, the education counterpart to HMOs.)

But there is a paradox at the core of this transformation. Quality education is labor-intensive, it depends upon a low teacher-student ratio, and significant interaction between the two parties—the one utterly unambiguous result of a century of educational research. Any effort to offer quality in education must therefore presuppose a substantial and sustained investment in educational labor, whatever the medium of instruction. The requirements of commodity production, however, undermine the labor-intensive foundation of quality education (and with it, quality products people will willingly pay for). Pedagogical promise and economic efficiency are thus in contradiction. Here is the Achilles' heel of distance education. In the past as well as the present, distance educators have always insisted that they offer a kind of intimate and individualized instruction not possible in the crowded, competitive environment of the campus. Theirs is an improved, enhanced education. To make their enterprise profitable, however, they have been compelled to reduce their instructional costs to a minimum, thereby undermining their pedagogical promise. The invariable result has been not only a degraded labor force but a degraded product as well. Thus, what is at stake in the struggle over the commodification of education is not only the professional autonomy and working conditions of educators but our understanding of education itself. The history of correspondence education provides a cautionary tale in this regard, a lesson of a debacle hardly heeded by those today so frantically engaged in repeating it.

The rhetoric of the correspondence education movement a century ago was almost identical to that of the current distance education movement: anytime, anywhere education (they didn’t yet use the word “asynchronous”), accessible to anyone from home or workplace, advance at your own pace, profit from personalized, one-on-one contact with your instructor, avoiding the crowded classroom and boring lecture hall. In brief, correspondence instruction emerged in the last decade of the nineteenth century along two parallel paths, as a commercial, for-profit enterprise, and as an extension of university-based higher education. At the heart of both was the production and distribution of prepackaged courses of instruction, educational commodities bought, sold, and serviced through the mail.

The commercial effort arose in the expectation of profiting from the growing demand for vocational and professional training, generated by increasingly mechanized and science-based industrial activity, and rapidly devolved into what became known as diploma mills. The university effort arose in response to the same demand for vocational training, as an attempt to protect traditional academic turf from commercial competition, to tap into a potent new source of revenues, and as a result of a genuinely progressive movement for democratic access to education, particularly adult education. While the universities tried initially to distinguish themselves in both form and content from their increasingly disreputable commercial rivals, in the end, having embarked down the same path of commodity production, they tended invariably to resemble them, becoming diploma mills in their own right.

The parallels with the present situation are striking. For-profit commercial firms are once again emerging to provide vocational training to working people via computer-based distance instruction. Universities are once again striving to meet the challenge of these commercial enterprises, generate new revenue streams, and extend the range and reach of their offerings. And although trying somehow to distinguish themselves from their commercial rivals—while collaborating ever more closely with them—they are once again coming to resemble them, this time as digital diploma mills. In the following pages we will examine in some detail the history of the correspondence education movement in the United States, looking first at the commercial ventures and then at the parallel efforts of the universities. The
account of the university experience is based upon heretofore unexamined archival records of four of the leading institutions engaged in correspondence instruction: the University of Chicago, Columbia University, the University of Wisconsin, and the University of California, Berkeley. Although based upon different technologies from the online university—the railroad and the postal service rather than computers and fiber-optic cable—the correspondence education movement exemplified the same logic of commodification.

Thomas J. Foster established one of the earliest private, for-profit correspondence schools in Pennsylvania in the late 1880s to provide vocational training in mining, mine safety, drafting and metalworking. Spurred by the success of these efforts, he founded in 1892 the International Correspondence Schools, which became one of the largest and most enduring enterprises in this burgeoning new education industry. By 1926 there were over three hundred such schools in the United States, with an annual income of over $70 million (one and a half times the income of all colleges and universities combined), with fifty new schools being started each year. In 1924 these commercial enterprises, which catered primarily to people who sought qualifications for job advancement in business and industry, boasted of an enrollment four times that of all colleges, universities, and professional schools combined. Copyrighted courses were developed for the firms in-house by their own staff or under contract with outside “experts,” and were administered through the mail by in-house or contract instructors. Students were recruited through advertisements and myriad promotional schemes, peddled by a field sales force employed on a commission basis.

In their promotional activities and material, targeted to credulous and inexperienced youth, the commercial firms claimed that their courses would guarantee students careers, security, wealth, status, and self-respect. “If you want to be independent,” one firm pitched, “if you want to make good in the world; if you want to get off somebody’s payroll and head one of your own; if you want the many pleasures and luxuries that are in the world for you and your family; if you want to banish forever the fear of losing your job, then, sign the pay-raising enrollment blank! Get it to me! Right now!” The chief selling point of education by means of correspondence, the firms maintained, was personalized instruction for busy people. “The student has the individual attention of the teacher while he is reciting, though it is in writing,” another firm explained. The student “works at his own tempo set by himself and not fixed by the average capacities of a large number of students studying simultaneously. He can begin when he likes, study at any hours convenient to him, and finish as soon as he is able.”

In all of the firms a priority was placed upon securing enrollment and the lion’s share of effort and revenues was expended in promotion and sales rather than in instruction. Typically between 50 and 80 percent of tuition fees went into direct mail campaigns, magazine and newspaper advertisements, and the training and support of a sales staff responsible for “cold canvassing,” soliciting “prospects” and intensive follow-ups and paid by the number of enrollments they obtained. “The most intensive work of all the schools is, in fact, devoted to developing the sales force,” John Noffsinger observed in his 1926 Carnegie Corporation-sponsored study of correspondence schools written when the correspondence movement was at its peak. “This is by far the most highly organized and carefully worked out department of the school.” “The whole emphasis on salesmanship is the most serious criticism to be made against the system of correspondence education as it now exists,” Noffsinger noted. “Perhaps it cannot be avoided when schools are organized for profit,” he added.

Indeed, the pursuit of profit tended inescapably to subvert the noble intentions, or pretensions, of the enterprises, especially in what had become a highly competitive (and totally unregulated) field in which many firms came and went and some made handsome fortunes. In a burgeoning industry increasingly dominated by hucksters and swindlers who had little genuine knowledge of or interest in education per se, promotional claims were easily exaggerated to the point of fraud and the sales forces were encouraged to sign up any and all prospects, however ill-prepared for the coursework, in order to fulfill their quotas and reap their commissions (which often amounted to as much as a third of the tuition). Enrollees were typically required to pay the full tuition or a substantial part of it up front and most of the firms had a no-refund policy for the 90 to 95 percent of the students who failed to complete their course of study. (In Noffsinger’s survey of seventy-five correspondence schools only 2.6 percent of the enrolled students completed the courses they had begun.)

The remarkably high dropout rate was not an accident. It reflected not only the shameless methods of recruitment but also the shoddy quality of what was being offered—the inevitable result of the profit-driven commodification of education. If the lion’s share of revenues were expended on pro-
motion—to recruit students and secure the up-front tuition payments—a mere pittance was expended on instruction. In the commercial firms the promotional staff was four to six times—and oftentimes twenty to thirty times—the size of the instructional staff and compensation of the former was typically many times that of the latter. In some firms, less than one cent of every tuition dollar went into instruction. For the actual “delivery” of courses—the correction of lessons and grading exams—most firms relied upon a casualized workforce of “readers” who worked part-time and were paid on a piecework basis per lesson or exam (roughly twenty cents per lesson in the 1920s). Many firms preferred “sub-professional” personnel, particularly untrained older women, for routine grading. These people often worked under sweatshop conditions, having to deliver a high volume of lessons in order to make a living, and were unable therefore to manage more than a perfunctory pedagogical performance. Such conditions were of course not conducive to the kind of careful, individualized instruction promised in the company’s promotional materials. (As Noffsinger pointed out in his Carnegie study, “the lack of personal contact between teacher and student” was the “chief weakness” of the instruction.) The central “pedagogical” concern of the firms was clearly to keep instructional costs to a bare minimum, a fact caricatured in vaudeville sketches of correspondence education in which all work was done by a lone mail clerk and the instructors dropped out of sight altogether.

All of this made perfect economic sense, however, and was summed up in correspondence industry jargon in the phrase “dropout money.” Since students were required to pay their tuition upfront without the possibility of a refund, and instructors were paid on a piecework basis, once students dropped out there was no further instructional expense and what remained of the up-front payment was pure profit: “dropout money.” Given the economics of this cynical educational system, there was no incentive whatsoever to try to retain students by upgrading the conditions of instruction and thereby improving the quality of course offerings. The economics in fact dictated the opposite, to concentrate all efforts upon recruitment and next to nothing on instruction. Already by the mid-1920s—when the correspondence movement was at its peak—increasing criticism of the commercial correspondence firms had largely discredited the industry, which was coming to be seen as a haven for disreputable hustlers and diploma mills. In 1924 the New York Board of Regents condemned the schools for their false claims and for their no-refund policies. “There is nothing inherent in correspondence as a method of instruction to disqualify it as a way to education,” wrote Noffsinger, an avid supporter of adult distance education (and later official of the National Home Study Council, established to try to regulate the industry). “Unfortunately,” however, he lamented, “the majority of correspondence schools are not well equipped and still less conscientiously conducted. They are commercial enterprises designed to make quick and easy profits. Many of them are in the shady zone bordering on the criminal. A large proportion of those who enroll in correspondence courses are wasting time, money, and energy or even are being swindled.” Noffsinger condemned “the victimization of hundreds of thousands who now are virtually robbed of savings and whose enthusiasm for education is crushed.” In the commercial schools, Noffsinger warned, “the making of profit is their first consideration, a dangerous situation at best in education.”

The evolution of university-based correspondence instruction closely paralleled that of the commercial schools. Following some early stillborn experiments in academic correspondence instruction in the 1880s, the university-based movement began in earnest in the 1890s; by the teens and twenties of this century it had become a craze comparable to today’s mania for online distance education. The first entrant into the field was the newly founded University of Chicago whose first president, William Rainey Harper, was an early enthusiast for distance education. By the time he moved to Chicago from Yale, Harper had already had considerable experience in teaching via correspondence through the Chautauqua organization in New York State, and he made the Home Study Department one of the founding pillars of the new university. Following the lead of Chicago other institutions soon joined the ranks of the movement, notably the state universities of Wisconsin, Nebraska, Minnesota, Kansas, Oregon, Texas, Missouri, Colorado, Pennsylvania, Indiana, and California. By 1919, when Columbia University launched its home study program, there were already seventy-three colleges and universities offering instruction by correspondence. Emphasizing the democratization of education and hoping to tap into the lucrative market exploited by their commercial rivals, the universities echoed the sales pitch of the private schools.

Hervey F. Mallory, head of the University of Chicago Home Study Department, proclaimed the virtues of individualized instruction, insisting that education by correspondence was akin to a “tutorial relationship” that “may prove to be superior to the usual method of teaching.” “The student acts independently and for himself but at the same time, being in contact with the teacher,
he is also enabled to secure special help for every difficulty." Correspondence study, the department advertised, offered three "unique advantages": "you receive individual personal attention; you work as rapidly as you can, or as slowly as necessary, unhindered by others as in a regular class"; and your studies "may begin at any time and may be carried on according to any personal schedule and in any place where postal service is available." Mallory insisted that correspondence study offered an education better than anything possible in "the crowded classroom of the ordinary American University." "It is impossible in such a context to treat students as individuals, overcome peer pressure for conformity, encourage students who are shy, slow, intimidated by a class setting." Home study, by contrast, "takes into account individual differences in learning" and the students "may do course work at any time and any place, and at their own personal pace." From the evangelical perspective of its proponents, then, correspondence education was more than just an extension of traditional education; it was an improvement, a means of instruction at once less costly and of higher quality, an advance, in short, which signaled a revolution in higher education. "What warrant is there for believing that the virility of the more ancient type of cloistered college and university could be maintained, except here and there, in our business civilization?" Mallory asked rhetorically. "The day is coming," President Harper prophesied, heralding that revolution, "when the work done by correspondence will be greater in amount than that done in the classroom of our academies and colleges, when the students who shall recite by correspondence will far outnumber those who make oral presentations."

As was the case with the commercial schools here too the promises and expectations of enthusiasts were thwarted by the realities of commodity production. Although they were not for-profit organizations per se, the correspondence programs of the universities were nevertheless largely self-supporting and hence, de facto, profit-oriented; a correspondence program's expenses had to be covered "by profits from its own operations," as Carl Huth of the University of Chicago's Home Study Department put it. And while it was initially assumed that this new form of instruction would be more economically efficient than traditional classroom-based instruction, the pioneers quickly discovered that correspondence instruction was far more costly to operate than they had imagined, owing primarily to the overhead entailed in administration. Almost from the outset, therefore, they found themselves caught up in much the same game as their commercial rivals: devising promotional schemes to boost enrollment in order to offset growing administrative costs, reducing their course preparation and revision expenses by standardizing their inventory and relying on "canned courses," and, above all, keeping instructional compensation to a minimum through the use of casual employment and payment by piece rate. Before too long, with a degraded product and dropout rates almost comparable to that of the commercial firms, they too had come to depend for their survival upon "dropout money."

From the outset, the leaders of the university programs pointedly distinguished their work from that of their disreputable commercial counterparts. It was unfortunate that the universities had "stepped aside to leave large part of the field of adult education to commercial schools or even to confidence men and swindlers," Mallory noted, but the new university programs would correct for that failure. "The most important fact about the university system of correspondence instruction in contrast to that of the commercial schools," he argued, "is the fact of institutional background, and that background is a great public-service institution—a modern university... an organic whole whose spiritual or immaterial aspects are far more important than the concrete parts." The Home Study Department of the University of Chicago, he insisted, was "interwoven with the university" and thus reflected its exalted traditions and mission—what would today be called "brandworthiness." Accordingly, the Home Study Department initially emphasized that its courses would be taught by the same professors who taught courses on campus and, indeed, at the outset even President Harper himself offered a course by correspondence. But within a few years, most of the course delivery was being handled by an assortment of instructors, readers, associate readers, fellows, lecturers, associate lecturers, and assistants, their pay meager and their status low. They were paid on a piece rate basis—roughly thirty cents per lesson and, under university statutes, received no benefits. Representatives from the regular faculty ranks were largely those at the lower rungs who took on correspondence work in order to supplement their own quite modest salaries. In order to make out, the Home Study instructors were compelled to take on a large volume of work that quickly devolved into uninspired drudgery, and it was understood that there was no future in it.

Initially, the Home Study Program was selective in its recruitment, requiring evidence of a prospective student's ability as a prerequisite for enrolling. A student had to have sufficient reason for not enrolling as a resident student and
had to "give satisfactory evidence, by examination or otherwise, that he is able to do the work required." (The University of Chicago required at least partial resident matriculation for those seeking degrees and required examinations for credit given by correspondence.) Eventually, however, such entrance requirements were dropped in order to increase enrollments. According to the Home Study brochure some years later, "You need not take an entrance examination, nor present a transcript of work done elsewhere. Your desire to enroll in a particular course will be taken as evidence that you are prepared to do the work of that course." Although there were some early efforts at advertising and salesmanship, these were kept within what were considered proper bounds for a respectable institution of higher education—a university policy lamented by the Home Study Department, especially in the face of competition from other, more aggressive, institutions such as Columbia.

As in the case of the commercial schools here too the reduced quality of the courses combined with the lack of preparation of those enrolled produced a very high dropout rate. And like the commercial schools, the University of Chicago adopted a no-refund policy; tuition was to be paid in full at the time of registration and, once registration was completed, fees were not refundable. As late as 1939, and despite the criticism of commercial schools on just this count, the university's president, Robert Hutchins, the renowned champion of classical education, reaffirmed this policy. "The registration and tuition fee will not be refunded to a student whose application has been accepted and who has been duly enrolled in a course," Hutchins wrote to a correspondence student. "This statement reflects standard practice in correspondence schools everywhere."

Columbia University did not join the correspondence movement until 1919 but quickly became a leader in the field with revenues matched only by the University of Chicago. It owed its success to an unusually ambitious program aimed at a national and international market and an aggressive promotional effort that rivaled that of the commercial schools. A home study program was first proposed in 1915 by James Egbert, Columbia's head of extension, and the idea was enthusiastically endorsed by Columbia's president, Nicholas Murray Butler, an avid supporter of adult education who had earlier in his career been the founding director of Columbia's summer session for part-time students. In full flower by the mid-twenties, the Columbia correspondence program was providing instruction to students in every state and fifty foreign countries.

Although Columbia never gave academic credit for its correspondence courses aside from a certificate of completion, the university nevertheless strove to distinguish its offerings from those of the commercial schools, emphasizing "personal contact and supervision," concentrating on recognized academic subjects, limiting the number of students in each course, and keeping standards high through regular review of material by the appropriate academic faculty. The twofold aim of home study, according to Egbert, was to extend the enlightening reach of the university while at the same time generating additional revenue. He and his colleagues soon discovered, however, that the preparation of course materials and the administration of the program were more demanding, labor-intensive, and expensive than had been anticipated. To offset these costs, they moved to broaden the correspondence curriculum into more lucrative vocational areas of every sort and to expand their promotional activities in an effort to enlarge the enrollment. In 1920 home study had 156 students; by 1926 there were nearly five thousand and that number was doubled by 1929. As Egbert undertook "to apply business methods" to his expanding operation, the program employed a national sales force of sixty "field representatives" (as compared to one hundred instructors) who were paid a commission according to the number of students they enrolled.

In addition, Columbia mounted a full-scale national advertising campaign in the manner of the commercial firms, with such themes as "Profit by Your Capacity to Learn," "Will You Increase Your Fixed Assets?" "Turning Leisure to Profit," "Who Controls Your Future?" "Who Is Too Old to Learn?" and "Of What Can You Be Certain?" In 1929 Egbert proudly unveiled plans for a vastly expanded enterprise that would be housed in a new twelve-story building. Compared to the lavish expenditure on promotion, the home study program kept its instructional expenses to a minimum. Here too all payment for instruction was on a piece rate, per lesson basis. As at Chicago, while some faculty engaged in home study in order to supplement their salaries, they were likely to be "academic lame ducks," as one home study official described them, and the bulk of instruction was performed by a casualized low-status workforce of instructors, lecturers, and assistants. Overworked and undervalued, they were not quite able or inclined to provide the "personal contact" that was promised. While the Home Study Department continued to boast that all of their courses were "prepared so as to enable the instructor to adjust all study to the individual needs of each student," that "direct contact is maintained between the student and the instructor personally [emphasis in original]
throughout the course," and that correspondence students "can attain the many advantages of instruction of University grade, under the constant guidance, suggestion, and help of regular members of the University teaching staff," the reality was otherwise. Together with fraudulent advertising and an indiscriminate enrollment policy, inescapably perfunctory instruction produced a dropout rate of 80 percent, a rate comparable to that of the for-profit commercial schools.

The experience of two of the largest state university correspondence programs, Wisconsin and California (Berkeley), was similar to that of the private Chicago and Columbia, even though their institutions could draw upon public funds, because here too the departments were required to be largely self-supporting (public subsidy might be available for overhead but not instruction, which had to be borne by student fees). The Regents authorized correspondence courses at Wisconsin as early as 1891, a year before the University of Chicago, but it was not until 1906 that an actual correspondence department was established as part of Wisconsin's famous extension program. From the very beginning, it was made explicit that correspondence courses "shall not involve the university in any expense." Originally correspondence instruction was conducted under the auspices of the regular faculty although the actual instructional duties were performed by "fellows" and "advanced students." Because of the onerous workload, faculty participation was minimal and enrollment remained small. The effort was revived under President Charles R. van Hise and his new director of extension, Louis E. Reber, two engineers attuned especially to the training needs of industry.

Van Hise had recognized the economic potential of correspondence instruction, judging from the experience of the commercial schools, and he commissioned a study of the for-profit firms. "The enormous success of the commercial correspondence schools suggested that here was an educational opportunity which had been neglected by the Universities," van Hise wrote in 1906. "There are tens of thousands of students in the State of Wisconsin who are already taking correspondence work in private correspondence schools, probably more than thirty thousand, and they are paying for this work outside of the State more than three-quarters of a million dollars per annum."

Up to this point Wisconsin's correspondence courses had offered primarily academic and cultural fare under the auspices of the academic departments, but van Hise, at the behest of businessmen who offered to make donations to the university if it reactivated correspondence study, pushed the enterprise in a decidedly vocational and industrial direction. Reber, formerly the Dean of Engineering at Pennsylvania State University, had the same industrial orientation, viewing correspondence study primarily as a way of providing a trained workforce for industry. "It would be difficult under present conditions to provide a better means for meeting the persistent and growing demand for industrial training than the methods of correspondence study adopted by the University," he observed. "This fact has been cordially recognized and the work encouraged and aided by employers of men wherever it has been established." Before coming to Wisconsin Reber visited the International Correspondence Schools in Scranton and undertook to refashion the Wisconsin correspondence program along the same lines as that leading commercial enterprise.

Reber succeeded in having the correspondence department established independent of the regular faculty, with its own non-academic staff of instructors and with its courses removed from faculty control. Under Reber's direction the Wisconsin correspondence program grew enormously, drawing one of the largest enrollments in the country. The dropout rate was roughly 55 percent and "dropout money" was the name of the game.

Berkeley's program was modelled on Wisconsin's. Initially Berkeley's correspondence courses were meant to be the academic equivalent of resident courses, taught by university faculty and supervised by academic departments, and the university pledged to "place each student in direct personal contact with his instructor." But here too, the program administrators discovered that, as director Baldwin Woods later explained, "correspondence instruction is expensive."

Thus, for economic reasons, the program moved to expand enrollment by catering to the greatest demand, which was for vocational courses for people in business and industry, by engaging in "continuous promotion," employing "field representatives," and relaxing admissions standards ("there is no requirement for admission to a class save the ability to pursue the work with profit"). Enrollment increased fourfold and fees were later increased to whatever the market would bear. Most of the instructional work was done by low-status, part-time "readers" described by one director as "overworked" and who were paid on a piece rate basis of twenty-five to thirty-five cents per lesson. Not surprisingly, the dropout rate averaged 70 to 80 percent. Students were required to pay full tuition up front and a partial refund was allowed only if no more than two lessons had been completed. In 1926 the President's
Report declared that "the fee for a course must be set to bring in income. Expansion must be largely profitable."

At the end of the twenties, after nearly four decades in the business of correspondence instruction, the university-based programs began to come under the kind of scrutiny and scathing criticism heretofore reserved for the commercial schools. The first and most damning salvo came from Abraham Flexner, one of the nation's most distinguished and influential observers of higher education. Best known for his earlier indictment of medical education on behalf of the Carnegie Foundation, Flexner had served for fifteen years as general secretary of the Rockefeller-funded General Education Board and later became the founding director of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. After his retirement from the General Education Board in 1928, Flexner delivered his Rhodes Lectures on the state of higher education in England, Germany, and the United States, which were published in 1930 under the simple title *Universities*.

In his lectures on the situation in the United States, Flexner excoriated the American universities for their commercial preoccupations, for having compromised their defining independence and integrity, and for having thereby abandoned their unique and essential social function of disinterested critical and creative inquiry. At the heart of his indictment was a scornful assessment of university-based correspondence education, focusing in detail upon the academically unseemly activities of the University of Chicago and Columbia University. Flexner acknowledged the social importance of correspondence and vocational education but questioned whether they belonged in a university, where they distracted the institution from its special intellectual mission, compromised its core values, and reoriented its priorities in a distinctly commercial direction. The rush to cash in on marketable courses and the enthusiasm for correspondence instruction, Flexner argued, "show the confusion in our colleges of education with training." The universities, he insisted, "have thoughtlessly and excessively catered to fleeting, transient, and immediate demands" and have "needlessly cheapened, vulgarized, and mechanized themselves," reducing themselves to "the level of the vendors of patent medicines."

He lampooned the intellectually trivial kinds of courses offered by the correspondence programs of Columbia, the University of Chicago, and the University of Wisconsin, and wondered about what would make "a great university descend to such humbug." "What sort of contribution is Columbia making towards a clearer apprehension of what education really is?", Flexner asked. He particularly decried Columbia's indiscriminate enrollment practices and especially its elaborate and deceptive promotional effort which, he argued, "befuddles the public" and generates a "spurious demand." If Columbia's correspondence courses were genuinely of "college grade" and taught by "regular members of the staff," as Columbia advertised, then why was no academic credit given for them? If correspondence instruction was superior to that of the traditional classroom, then why did not Columbia sell off its expensive campus and teach all of its courses by mail? "The whole thing is business, not education," Flexner concluded. "Columbia, untaxed because it is an educational institution, is in business: it has education to sell [and] plays the purely commercial game of the merchant whose sole concern is profit." Likewise, he bemoaned as "scandalous" the fact that "the prestige of the University of Chicago should be used to bamboozle well-meaning but untrained persons ... by means of extravagant and misleading advertisements." Finally, Flexner pointed out that regular faculty in most institutions remained justifiably skeptical of correspondence and vocational instruction. The "administrative professoriate," he declared, "is a proletariat."

Flexner's critique of correspondence education, which gained widespread media attention, sent shock waves through academia, prompting internal efforts to raise standards and curtail excessive and misleading advertising. At Columbia, the blow was eventually fatal to the correspondence program. A year after the publication of Flexner's book—and the unveiling of Columbia's ambitious plans for a vastly expanded program with its own grand headquarters—President Butler wrote to his extension director Egbert that "a good many people are impressed unfavorably with our Home Study advertising and continually call my attention to it. I should like to have you oversee this advertising very carefully from the viewpoint of those who criticize it as 'salesmanship,' etc." The result of this belated concern was a severe restriction of advertising (which lasted at Columbia until the late 1960s). The continued unwillingness of Columbia's Administrative Board to grant academic credit for correspondence courses—largely because of the low regard in which these courses were held by the regular faculty—coupled with the restrictions on general advertising, which the board had now come to deem "inappropriate and unwise," effectively undermined the effort to maintain enrollments sufficient to sustain the department (especially in the midst of the Depression).
and it was finally officially discontinued in 1937. A year after Flexner's critique, and partly in response to it, the American Association for Adult Education launched a Carnegie Corporation-funded survey of university-based correspondence courses under the direction of Hervey Mallory, longtime head of the Home Study Department at the University of Chicago. Published in 1933 as University Teaching By Mail, the study, which generally endorsed and called for the improvement of the correspondence method, acknowledged the validity of much of the criticism.

Referring explicitly to Flexner, the study noted that "many believe that correspondence instruction is not a function of college or university" and wonder "how does it come that literature and art have fallen to the absurd estate of commodities requiring advertisement and postal shipment?" The study argued, however, that while "there is something fine and entirely right in the demand for independence, integrity, and disinterestedness" on the part of universities, the "ideals of practical service, of experiment in educational method, and of participation in the life of the community" are not incompatible with it and insisted that many, especially mature, students had benefitted from correspondence instruction. The study conceded, on the other hand, that "it may be that schoolmen and businessmen have . . . created the demand by a false propaganda of success through education, of promise of fame, wealth, and rewards displayed in correspondence and art have fallen to the absurd estate of commodities requiring advertisement and postal shipment?" The study argued, however, that while "there is something fine and entirely right in the demand for independence, integrity, and disinterestedness" on the part of universities, the "ideals of practical service, of experiment in educational method, and of participation in the life of the community" are not incompatible with it and insisted that many, especially mature, students had benefitted from correspondence instruction. The study conceded, on the other hand, that "it may be that schoolmen and businessmen have . . . created the demand by a false propaganda of success through education, of promise of fame, wealth, and rewards displayed in correspondence advertising." In surveying the weaknesses of the method, the study acknowledged the narrowly utilitarian motive and also the "very real isolation" of most correspondence students, owing not only to the intrinsic limitations of the correspondence method of instruction but also to the pressures on instructors that further undermined its promise. "One of the charges against the correspondence study system is that it tends to exploit the student by inducing him to enroll and pay fees, and then fails to give adequate service in return," the study observed; students routinely complained about "insufficient corrections and comments by the instructor" and the "lack of 'personal' contacts with instructors" that contributed to the excessively high dropout rates. In the light of such apparently inescapable weaknesses of correspondence instruction, the authors of the study abandoned altogether earlier evangelical expectations about this new method someday supplanting traditional education and insisted instead, much more modestly, that correspondence instruction should be employed only as a supplement to, rather than a substitute for, classroom instruction. "No reputable proponent of home study seriously suggests that correspondence teaching should replace classroom instruction," the authors declared. "Correspondence study is not advocated as a substitute for campus study, but is established as a supplement with peculiar merits and demerits. Correspondence courses are of the most value to the individual when taken in conjunction with a residence program. They are not a substitute for education. They should not be taken merely in conjunction with one's job or avocation, nor are they to be used simply as a hobby or as an exercise of will power by itself. They serve individual purposes best when they fit into a long-time, socialized program of education." Earlier claims about the alleged superiority of correspondence over classroom instruction were likewise abandoned and various attempts to "experimentally" compare the two were dismissed as scientifically spurious and inconclusive.

The study devoted considerable attention to the unsatisfactory working conditions of instructors—notably that they were overworked and underpaid—in accounting for the failings of the method, which depended ultimately upon "the willingness of the instructor to give a generous amount of attention to the student." "When that fails," the authors noted, "the special merit of the correspondence method, individual instruction, remains individual chiefly on the students' side alone—this is the chief weakness in method—perfunctory reading of reports, lack of helpful suggestions, and delay and neglect by over-burdened" instructors. Instructors excused their perfunctory performance on the grounds that the pay was too small to merit the effort and the authors of the survey confirmed that the workload of instructors was typically excessive and that "the willingness of the instructor to give a generous amount of attention to the student," "When that fails," the authors noted, "the special merit of the correspondence method, individual instruction, remains individual chiefly on the students' side alone—this is the chief weakness in method—perfunctory reading of reports, lack of helpful suggestions, and delay and neglect by over-burdened" instructors. Instructors excused their perfunctory performance on the grounds that the pay was too small to merit the effort and the authors of the survey confirmed that the workload of instructors was typically excessive and that "the willingness of the instructor to give a generous amount of attention to the student," "When that fails," the authors noted, "the special merit of the correspondence method, individual instruction, remains individual chiefly on the students' side alone—this is the chief weakness in method—perfunctory reading of reports, lack of helpful suggestions, and delay and neglect by over-burdened" instructors. Instructors excused their perfunctory performance on the grounds that the pay was too small to merit the effort and the authors of the survey confirmed that the workload of instructors was typically excessive and that "the willingness of the instructor to give a generous amount of attention to the student," "When that fails," the authors noted, "the special merit of the correspondence method, individual instruction, remains individual chiefly on the students' side alone—this is the chief weakness in method—perfunctory reading of reports, lack of helpful suggestions, and delay and neglect by over-burdened" instructors. Instructors excused their perfunctory performance on the grounds that the pay was too small to merit the effort and the authors of the survey confirmed that the workload of instructors was typically excessive and that "the willingness of the instructor to give a generous amount of attention to the student," "When that fails," the authors noted, "the special merit of the correspondence method, individual instruction, remains individual chiefly on the students' side alone—this is the chief weakness in method—perfunctory reading of reports, lack of helpful suggestions, and delay and neglect by over-burdened" instructors. Instructors excused their perfunctory performance on the grounds that the pay was too small to merit the effort and the authors of the survey confirmed that the workload of instructors was typically excessive and that "the willingness of the instructor to give a generous amount of attention to the student," "When that fails," the authors noted, "the special merit of the correspondence method, individual instruction, remains individual chiefly on the students' side alone—this is the chief weakness in method—perfunctory reading of reports, lack of helpful suggestions, and delay and neglect by over-burdened" instructors. Instructors excused their perfunctory performance on the grounds that the pay was too small to merit the effort and the authors of the survey confirmed that the workload of instructors was typically excessive and that "the willingness of the instructor to give a generous amount of attention to the student," "When that fails," the authors noted, "the special merit of the correspondence method, individual instruction, remains individual chiefly on the students' side alone—this is the chief weakness in method—perfunctory reading of reports, lack of helpful suggestions, and delay and neglect by over-burdened" instructors.
doing a merely perfunctory job of paper criticism.” “Nearly all university correspondence teachers might be designated as fee instructors,” the study found, “since few are on a salary basis.”

While the authors of the Carnegie study criticized such pedagogically counterproductive employment practices—and also the “usual policy of the universities not to refund fees” to students who drop out—they placed the blame not so much on the university correspondence programs per se but rather on the commercial pressures with which they were unfairly burdened. “Most university correspondence courses are underfunded and understaffed,” they noted, and each is forced to be self-supporting, leaving them no choice but to adopt the unseemly commercial practices of their for-profit cousins. “Correspondence instruction in the university should not be required to ‘pay its way’ in a business sense any more than classroom instruction,” the authors insisted. “The business methods should not be those of a commercial concern whose prime motive is to dispose of commodities or services for a money profit.” Yet the survey showed that such was clearly the case. Although the authors warned that no “university correspondence administration should not lay itself open even remotely to objection on grounds of dubious commercial practices, such as ‘charging what the traffic will bear,’ exacting from students fees that will yield a profit, or giving instructors poor compensation in order to keep costs low,” they knew that, given the circumstances in which they were compelled to operate, the circumstances of commodity production, they had no other option.

The belatedly modest and critical tone of the Carnegie survey signaled that the heyday of correspondence education was over. The great expectations of this first foray into the commodification of higher education had been exploded and the movement was spent. Strong criticism of the private, for-profit correspondence schools was ritually repeated over the years, with little noticeable effect, particularly in a series of studies sponsored by the American Council on Education. Likewise, subsequent examinations of university-based correspondence education continued to confirm the findings of the 1933 survey. Thirty years later the General Accounting Office was warning veterans on the GI Bill not to waste their federal funds on correspondence courses. In 1968 the Carnegie-funded Correspondence Education Research Project, which had been commissioned by the National Home Study Council (later renamed the Distance Education and Training Council) and the National University Extension Association, found that correspondence courses suffered from poor quality, perfunctory instructor performance, and a very high dropout rate; that instructors endured low pay (on a piece rate basis) and low status; that programs continued to rely upon “dropout money” to survive; and that there was little prospect for improvement “as long as correspondence instruction is held in such low esteem.”

All such investigations and attendant efforts at reform and regulation invariably failed to change the picture, even as correspondence programs adopted the latest media of delivery, including film, telephone, radio, audiotapes, and television. Universities continued to offer correspondence instruction, of course, but the efforts were much more modest in their claims and ambitions. Poor cousins of classroom instruction, they were for the most part confined to institutionally separate and self-supporting extension divisions and carefully cordoned off from the campus proper, presumably to spare the core institution the expense, the commercial contamination, and the criticism.

Like their now forgotten forebears, today’s proponents of distance education believe they are leading a revolution that will transform the educational landscape. Fixated on technology and the future, they are unencumbered by the sober lessons of this cautionary tale or by any understanding of the history they are so busy repeating. If anything, the commercial element in distance education is this time even stronger, heralded anew as a bold departure from tradition. For, now, instead of trying to distinguish themselves from their commercial rivals, the universities are eagerly joining forces with them, lending their brand names to profit-making enterprises in exchange for a piece of the action.

The four institutions examined here as prominent players in the first episode of distance learning are, of course, at it again. The University of Wisconsin has a deal with Lotus/IBM and other private contractors to develop and deliver online distance education, especially under the auspices of its Learning Innovations Center, while the University of California has contracts with America Online and Onlinelearning.net for the same purposes. And the University of Chicago and Columbia are among the most enterprising participants in the new distance education gold rush. The University of Chicago signed a controversial deal with a start-up online education company called UNEXT.com, which is headed by Chicago trustee Andrew Rosenfield and bankrolled in part by junk bond felon Michael Milken. Principal investors in the company include the dean of the law school and two of Chicago’s Nobel
prize-winning economists. The new game is less about generating revenues from student fees than about reaping a harvest from financial speculation in the education industry through stock options and initial public offerings.

The first university to sign up with UNEXT was Columbia, which has licensed UNEXT to use the school's logo in return for a share in the business. "I was less interested in the income stream than in the capitalization. The huge upside essentially is the value of the equity in the IPO," Columbia's Business School dean, Meyer Feldberg, a friend of Milken's, told the Wall Street Journal. "I don't see a downside," he added, betraying an innocence of Columbia's history that would make Flexner roll over in his grave. "I guess our exposure would be if in some way our brand name is devalued by some problem with this experimental venture." Columbia has also set up its own for-profit online distance education company, Morningside Ventures, headed by an executive formerly with the National Football League, satellite, and cable TV companies. Columbia's executive vice president, Michael Crow, explained the need for the company with hyperbole reminiscent of that of his prophesying predecessors in the correspondence movement. "After a thousand years, university-based education is undergoing a fundamental transformation," he declared; "multi-media learning initiatives" are taking us beyond the classroom and the textbook. And he acknowledged the essentially commercial nature of this transformation. "Because of the technologies required and the non-traditional revenue streams involved," he noted, "corporations will play a major role in these new forms of education. We felt the need for a for-profit company to compete effectively and productively."

Last but not least, Columbia has now become party to an agreement with yet another company that intends to peddle its core arts and science courses. Columbia will develop courses and lend its brand name to the company's product line in return for royalties and stock options. According to one source, the company has already been busy recruiting faculty to the enterprise as course developers and has suggested the possibility of using professional actors to deliver them.

For the time being, however, until the actors arrive, the bulk of university-based online distance education courses are being delivered in the same manner as correspondence courses of old, by poorly paid and overworked low-status instructors, working on a per-course basis without benefits or job security and under coercion to assign their rights to their course materials to their employer as a condition of employment. The imperatives of commodi-ty production, in short, are again in full force, shaping the working conditions of instructors until they are replaced once and for all by machines, scriptwriters, and actors.

Just as the promoters of correspondence instruction learned the hard way that the costs of their new methods were much higher than anticipated and that they had to lower their labor costs to turn a profit, so the promoters of online instruction have belatedly discovered that the costs of this latest method are prohibitive unless they likewise reduce their labor costs. As Gregory Farrington, president of Lehigh University, observed recently, "unless the new technologies can be used to increase the average teaching productivity of faculty, there is virtually no chance that those technologies will improve the economics of traditional higher education." But increasing the "teaching productivity of faculty"—whether through job intensification, outsourcing, or the substitution of computers for people—essentially means increasing the number of students per teacher and this invariably results in an undermining of the pedagogical promise of the method, as the experience of correspondence instruction clearly demonstrates. And the degradation of the quality of the education invariably destroys the incentive and motivation of students. Already the dropout rates of online distance education are much higher than those of classroom-based instruction. Finally, as was the case with correspondence courses, it is not possible to receive a bona fide bachelor's degree from a reputable institution through the online medium alone. If online education were truly the equivalent of classroom education, as its proponents suggest, why won't the elite colleges and universities that have so avidly embraced it give full credit for this form of instruction? All rhetoric about the alleged democratization of higher education through online education collapses at this point. Of course, this is the very same challenge Flexner posed for correspondence education.

So here we go again. We have indeed been here before. But there are differences between the current rage for online distance education and the earlier debacle of correspondence distance education. First, the firewalls separating distance education programs from the core campus are breaking down; although they first took hold on the beachheads of extension divisions, commercial online initiatives have already begun to penetrate deeply into the heart of the university. Second, while the overhead for correspondence courses was expensive, the infrastructural expense for online courses exceeds it by an order of magnitude—a technological tapeworm in the guts of higher education. Finally, while correspondence programs were often aimed at a broad
market, most efforts remained merely regional. The ambitious reach of today's distance educators, on the other hand, is determinedly global in scale, which is why the World Trade Organization is currently at work trying to remove any and all barriers to international trade in educational commodities. In short, then, the dire implications of this second distance education craze far outstrip those of the first. Even if it fails to deliver on its economic and pedagogical promises, as it surely will, its promoters will push it forward nevertheless, given the investment entailed, leaving a legacy of corruption and ruin in its wake. In comparing Napoleon III with Napoleon I, Karl Marx formulated his famous dictum "first time tragedy, second time farce." A comparison of the past and present episodes of distance education suggests perhaps a different lesson, namely, that sometimes the tragedy follows the farce.