

# THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education

## Letters to the Editor

July 24, 2011

### 'Unintended Consequences' of Rule for Online Courses

To the Editor:

In your recent article about the burden of new federal regulations on online programs ("[As Costs of New Rule Are Felt, Colleges Rethink Online Course Offerings](#)," July 1), a public-college president refers to the "collateral damage" being caused to large public institutions by regulations designed to rein in for-profit colleges that have notoriously low student-completion rates and high student-loan-default rates.

If public institutions face collateral damage, then small, not-for-profit colleges—with even fewer staff members and resources—risk grave harm. And our plight was missing from your coverage. Consider: In New York State alone, 60 percent of independent colleges enroll 2,000 or fewer students. Many deliver distance education to out-of-state students to expand their geographic footprint. These incremental out-of-state enrollments often make small programs viable while significantly enhancing the options for both in-state and out-of-state students.

Union Graduate College launched an online master's of science in bioethics degree 11 years ago to fill a major gap in a fast-growing field. Our graduates counsel hospital patients on end-of-life decisions, teach pharmaceutical researchers how to design safe drug trials, and work with government officials to improve health-care policy and practice. With just a handful of bioethics programs available across the country, most of our students have no local degree option.

Our program is small (about 50 students) but growing. And we were recently awarded a second \$1-million grant from the National Institutes of Health's Fogarty International Center to provide our research-ethics courses in the emerging democracies of Eastern and Central Europe, where a void in human testing rules has been

exploited.

Yet our bioethics program may shut down because we cannot absorb the cost of meeting new online-degree regulations in the U.S. In the article, one community college reported having nine employees working on compliance. At Union Graduate College, that would be about a quarter of our total staff! Sadly, we may find ourselves able to provide master's-level education in bioethics to researchers in former Soviet Union states but be prevented from doing so here in the United States.

The new regulations imposed on schools offering online courses—and the subsequent burden they are causing—are a classic case of unintended consequences. Created to protect the integrity of a higher-education system that is the envy of the world, these complex, labor-intensive rules instead may destroy programs that are vital to student choice and our education system's vibrancy and value.

What a waste that would be.  
Laura Schweitzer, President  
Union Graduate College  
Schenectady, N.Y.