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## Digital Diploma Mills or Socratic Gymnasium? The Future of the University

by [Gary Brown](#) and [Mary Wack](#)

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Articles in the mass media portraying the online challengers to traditional higher education appear almost weekly, it seems. (For a recent example, see Freedman, [1999](#)). Most never cross our desk. But when, in one week last year, we received four copies of David Noble's "Digital Diploma Mills: The Automation of Higher Education" ([1998](#))—two from colleagues, one from the executive secretary of the Faculty Senate, and one from an interim administrator—we knew that this kind of response indicated a voice worth listening to. This fall, Noble's article was the centerpiece of faculty debate at the University of Virginia, which has produced a hypertextual "collage of ideas" stimulated by the article (*Virginia.edu*, [1998](#)).

Noble argues vigorously that we are entering a new era of "commoditization" of instruction, resulting from an alliance of Machiavellian administrators and corporate predators. Faculty activity is being restructured via technology so that faculty's "autonomy, independence, and control over their work" is reduced and as much control as possible is placed into the hands of the administration, which then renders the faculty redundant: "Once the faculty converts its courses into courseware, their services are in the long run no longer required." Noble points the finger of blame at Educom, among many others, for the commercialization of higher education.

In "Technology in Education: The Fight for the Future" ([1998](#)), Ben Schneiderman, Richard Herman, Phil Agre, and Peter Denning summarize Noble's article and respond individually. The authors attempt to separate the wheat from the chaff in Noble's piece, generally unraveling conspiracy-theory rhetoric from substantive issues of institutional organization, economic pressures, and faculty roles. In the section "Meet Me at the Crux," Agre argues that we must think systemically and holistically about higher education, analyzing the interactions among technology, economics, legal issues, and organizational structure. His questions are critical if we are to defy Noble's dystopian vision and map our own institutional futures.

Agre asks: "What exactly does the independence of the professoriate consist of, how is it produced and reproduced, and what does it contribute to the health of a democratic society?" His question touches, in general terms, the central issue that generates such strong responses to Noble's work: the rewriting of the rules and roles of faculty work. Noble offers a mirror that shows faculty to be in the simultaneously alluring and humiliating position of being increasingly alienated from their teaching in a Marxian sense and becoming the new cash cows of the intellectual property (IP) game in the higher education market. Teaching—always second-class and ambiguous, at least in research institutions—becomes the site of a new crisis of identity.

David Jaffee offers an analysis of a little-discussed but important dimension of this identity crisis. In "Institutionalized Resistance to Asynchronous Learning Networks" (1998), Jaffee argues: "The recognition of the [physical] classroom as a sacred institution in higher education, and a major source of professorial identity, is a necessary step toward developing strategies for organizational change and pedagogical transformation." To reconfigure "sacred space" is to undertake changes far larger and more complicated than redesigning classrooms and courseware.

Gerhard Casper's (1995) speech for the American Educational Research Association, "Come the Millennium, Where the University?" fully recognizes the challenges that cyberspace offers to the university as physical space. Casper concludes: "The university as a physical space will remain attractive to the extent that we will make it more valuable to people to interact personally and face to face in learning and research. Ironically, our future may lie in going back to the pre-university Socratic gymnasium as our main model of discourse. The university as a physical space will be superior to anything else to the extent that we provide a convincing structure for individual learning."

The challenge for those committed to both universities as physical spaces and learning technologies is to discover and disseminate how those technologies enable new, convincing structures for individual learning. Or should we be looking at how technologies enable group learning? Next month, we'll look at critical readings on groupware and collaborative learning that may transform how we think and work in both physical and virtual spaces.

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