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Contaminated courses

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Contaminated Courses

Michael Simonson

*"Poorly Structured" ... "lack of attention by faculty" ... "insufficient oversight"
... "rogue tutor" ... "contaminated online class" ...*

When words such as the ones above are used to describe an online course, the field of distance education suffers immeasurable damage. Unfortunately, these phrases were used to describe an online course at the center of an athletic cheating scandal.

Every sports fan has read the many articles and reports in newspapers, sports

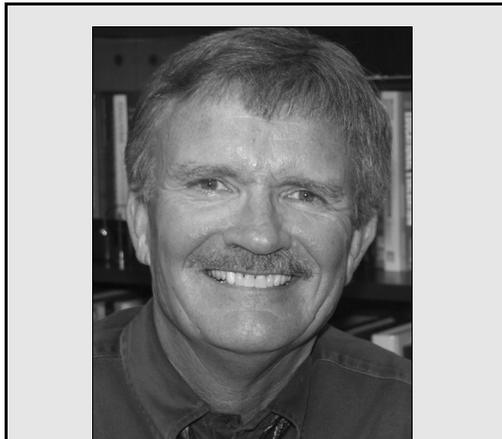
magazines, and online blogs, and heard the dozens of reports on talk shows, half-time reports, and evening news to know that student athletes who were enrolled in an online music history class were found to have cheated with the help of a tutor. The professor in charge of the class has claimed that it was well designed and state of the art.

The issue of athletes and cheating is an important and recurring theme in higher education. What is new is the cheating occurred in an online course—a *contaminated* online class, as Florida State University president T. K. Wetherell labeled it (Associated Press).

While the fact that the music history class was an online course was not at the center of the story, maybe it should have been. Perhaps an investigation of this class needs to be conducted. There are standards for online courses, there are best practices to be followed, and standards and best practices should be enforced. If distance education and online instruction are to remain legitimate and generally accepted, then courses must be outstanding.

Descriptions such as "poorly structured" must be replaced by "excellently

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organized," "lack of attention" must be replaced by "faculty and student interaction," "insufficient oversight" must be replaced by "highly rigorous," and "rogue" replaced by "exemplary."

The literature of the field gives sufficient guidance for the development of exemplary rather than contaminated courses. For example, a three-credit online course should be designed to expect at a minimum at least 100 hours of effort during the semester by the typical student. Next, rigorous and regular assessment strategies should be used to determine if students are learning. Finally, instructors should be trained to teach at a distance and should

be held accountable for the quality of their courses. Certainly, there are many additional standards and best practices for online courses. These standards and practices should be expected and enforced.

If "to contaminate" is to make impure by contact or association, then the field of distance education must be sure that it does not tolerate contaminated courses. We must enforce standards ourselves, or someone else will. And finally, the athletes were suspended, and their team lost the bowl game.

Information from ESPN.com and the Associated Press was referred to in this column.

A THREE-CREDIT ONLINE COURSE SHOULD BE DESIGNED TO EXPECT A MINIMUM OF 100 HOURS OF EFFORT DURING THE SEMESTER BY A TYPICAL STUDENT.