WEBSITES' ROLE IN THE PROMOTION OF DISTANCE EDUCATION:
A CASE STUDY OF GETEDUCATED.COM

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Introduction

The World Wide Web sites reflect a considerable variety of uses for computing and related forms of electronic technology in teaching and learning. GetEducated.Com, LLC, is an excellent non-commercial resource for everything that has to do with distance education. A large part of their mission is to help potential students "get educated" about online degrees including how to select a great degree for their needs among the hundreds of competing options now online in the U.S.A. The present author expounds websites' role in the promotion of distance education by conducting a case study of GetEducated.com, focusing on the possibilities it offers.

Background

GetEducated.com (http://www.geteducated.com/) has been online since 1989, with Vicky Phillips as its highly esteemed founder and CEO. Vicky Phillips served in the 1980s as Director of Academic Services and Registrar at Antioch University's San Francisco campus. Antioch is of course a pioneer in the U.S. in cooperative and experiential learning and had since the 1970s operated a "University Without Walls" distance learning degree program that allowed older disenfranchised learners (e.g. prisoners, rural residents, mid career changers) to design their own degree working with community mentors. Vicky has a master's in psychology and a counseling background, so she has always been aware that the psychological factors that motivate one to learn (or not) need to be addressed in order to create an environment that is conducive to learning. She also taught "night school" psychology to older learners studying to be therapists at the Antioch satellite campus in California. That experience introduced her about the need for a more accessible higher education system, one designed to accommodate older more knowledgeable learners. She left Antioch to design and launch the first online counseling center for adult learners in 1989 with an experimental company called The Electronic University Network. That group worked with colleges nationwide trying to get them to come online with their faculty and degrees.

Distance education has been around in the U.S. for a very long time in print correspondence and cable broadcast forms but until the Internet arrived as a delivery method most colleges considered distance learning a "lesser form of education". It is really amazing how the rise of the Internet and its popularity has made distance learning more acceptable among academic circles in the U.S. By 1995 Americans had started to use the Net for casual and leisure communication

and home PC penetration was high enough for mass awareness to expand. That is when growth of interest and program availability began to skyrocket. In 1989, when Vicky Phillips first surveyed the field there were three distance MBAs available. Today, they track and profile 120 options in Vicky's free guidebook, GetEducated.com's [Best Distance Learning Graduate Schools -Business & Management](http://www.geteducated.com/bdlgs_bm.htm) 2004 (http://www.geteducated.com/bdlgs_bm.htm). Internet delivery has made distance learning much more appealing to an American audience for several reasons. First, it is a much more interactive type of learning than print or cable TV correspondence and this appeals to both students and faculty. More importantly, according to their surveys, Americans adore technology and they respect it. An online degree just sounds better to most Americans than a correspondence degree.

The Possibilities GetEducated.Com Offers

GetEducated employs a core staff of five and utilizes the services of a number of contract agencies in specialty areas ranging from database development to editing. Their slogan is: *Don't get frustrated. Get educated!* As Rick Irish, a senior technical support specialist in the Production Services Division of BIS and a recent online student himself, put it,

> 'Today, many academic disciplines offer self-paced, home-study courses which result in a fully accredited degree via the World Wide Web. Some programs offer 'life experience' credit for job experience related to a chosen field, while others allow students to 'test out' introductory required course work. Some schools offer interactive multimedia training that varies from audio to video or CD-ROM to Internet online. Others offer resource assistance online including registration, course selection, research, tutorial assistance, chat rooms, and even examinations. Of course, none are free, but all offer varying levels of convenience. If you are really looking for a training opportunity, it isn't very difficult to find. Check out the site used as the title of this article…www.geteducated.com…or try www.accrediteddldegrees.com as starting points. These are not complete or exhaustive lists but will give you a flavor of what is available. You are only limited by your initiative and imagination! "

[http://www.state.me.us/newsletter/backissues/ july99/wwwgeteducatedcom.htm](http://www.state.me.us/newsletter/backissues/july99/wwwgeteducatedcom.htm)

GetEducated website does offer a lot of help. The Adult Education and Distance Learner's Resource Center provides resources which include:

· 	the Distance Learning and Accreditation FAQ;

·	a directory of colleges and graduate schools that offer online or other distance learning opportunities;

·	a weekly syndicated column on distance learning;

·	articles from publications;

·	and the links to three of the company's newsletters:

  o	*[Virtual University Gazette](http://www.geteducated.com/vugaz.htm)* (http://www.geteducated.com/vugaz.htm), a widely-applauded free monthly e-mail newsletter serving over 30,000 distance learning professionals and students at the adult, post-secondary levels. To subscribe it, you may just click *Subscribe Me!*

  o	*The Virtual University Business Digest*, America's first newsletter for executives working in the Internet-enabled adult education movement,

  o	and *The Global E-Learning News*, which covers the emerging global market for adult e-learning products and services.

The Distance Learner's Hall of Fame has real-life success stories of people like the founders of Ben and Jerry's ice cream.

What is most important, GetEducated.com screens all degree-granting universities and publishes *The Best Distance Learning Graduate Schools*. They operate the only clearinghouse in the USA dedicated exclusively to showcasing accredited online degrees. Unlike other online degree directories, college experts at GetEducated.com evaluate each and every program that applies to their site. We have noticed that unaccredited distance learning colleges are barred from their site. Online colleges accredited by bogus agencies do not appear on their site. Degree mills – fake Internet universities – are not allowed. They are, therefore, one of the safest places in cyberspace to shop for your online degree. This web's guides offer free basic listings to any qualified university. To qualify for a listing in the Best Distance Learning Graduate Schools series, a degree-granting university must be accredited by an agency recognized by the Council on Higher Education Accreditation.

Distance learning in the U.S.A. has been plagued by the growth of "diploma mills" or "degree mills" which prey on consumer ignorance about accreditation and higher education. More than 20 thousand government officials in this country were recently found to hold degrees from fake colleges. In view of this, many of the resources of GetEducated.com, such as their popular FAQ "Top Ten Signs You May Be Dealing with a Degree Mill", serve to protect consumers from fraud and misconception in this now billion-dollar scam industry. They screen every college that submits to their site. One valuable service they offer free of charge is to respond to people's

queries about particular colleges in regards to accreditation and quality. Their free guidebooks are:

- Ø   *Best Distance Learning Graduate Schools – Education & Library Science* (http://www.geteducated.com/bdlgs_ed.htm), a free guidebook to 65 accredited online master degrees and distance learning doctorates in education and training;

- Ø   *Best Distance Learning Graduate Schools – Technology* (http://www.geteducated.com/bdlgs_tech.htm), a free guidebook to over 85 accredited online degrees in technology, computer science, engineering and related tech areas;

- Ø   *Best Distance Learning Graduate Schools – Business & Management* (http://www.geteducated.com/bdlgs_bm.htm), a free guidebook to over 160 accredited online master degrees and distance learning doctorates in business and management;

- Ø   *Best Distance Learning Undergraduate Schools - Business & Management* (http://www.geteducated.com/bdlus_bm.htm), a guidebook over 100 accredited online bachelor degrees and distance learning associate degrees in business and management.

Vicky Phillips and her colleagues have also worked with a number of American and Canadian enterprises. Throughout the 90's they did a great deal of work helping companies and universities blueprint online campuses - that is to develop new curriculum, degrees, and learning platforms that responded to what adult learners wanted and that tapped the interactive potential of the Net. In this capacity, they developed multimedia course prototypes, surveyed learners as they came online to learn their preferences (a function they still undertake today), and began to collect and disseminate free college guidebooks and FAQs that helped both faculty and a new generation of online students get educated about online learning.

The GetEducated website has also contributed a great deal to the promotion of the English language teaching and learning endeavor. Vicky Phillips herself has written a couple of articles related to the English language teaching and learning, such as *Visions: Death of the Course*, in which she said, "Cognitive Arts says they make e-courses; I'll call their product something else. I'll term them educational immersions. Office workers can learn business English as a second language using Cognitive Arts courseware. But the 'course' doesn't teach abstract principles. The course assigns learners the fictive role of business executive, then invites them to learn English by responding to fictional inter-office memos and reports left in the learner's e-mail in-box. This is not your father's ESL class. The course is dead. Long live learning." (2001, http://www.geteducated.com/vug/nov01/vug1101c.htm)

Suggestions of Rating the Functionality of GetEducated.com

GetEducated.com does provide professional, efficient online support, but there can be still seen some necessities of rating the functionality of this web site. Most of the students in my university enjoy visiting GetEducated.com and some of them have got much good idea of how to get on online in terms of studying towards an MA degree in Computer Science or Business Administration. But to some other students' disappointment, they do not see any language diplomas or degrees screened by GetEducated.com. That is to say, they can't "get educated" in whatever ways they want. Therefore for the netizens' sake (a netizen means a citizen on net), the website is well-advised to rate its overall design and functionality by broadening its scope of service. We don't mean this well-known website does not show any interests in promoting language teaching and learning. On the opposite, they have done very well, particularly displayed by Vicky Phillips' deluge of articles in different contexts. But I still think that Vicky will agree one of the questions we should ask most frequently is, "How can we get more people to look at our site?" In other words, how can we get our "netizens" better educated?

It is necessary as well to make GetEducated.com a bit more user-friendly. The goal here is to provide the user with the information they want in the fewest possible steps, and in the shortest time. Making information on the site easy to find encourages people not only to use the site, but also to suggest this site to others and to come back to it when they need information. Remember the 8-second rule! Most Internet users have about 8-10 seconds of patience while they wait for pages to load. Don't keep them waiting or they'll leave and never return. To know how the visitor feels about GetEducated.com, it seems practical that Visitor Feedback column should be established. Give the users a way to offer suggestions and make comments. Make it easy for the users to contact you. They are a valuable and free resource.

Conclusion

"Great, I say, because of the excellence of the things themselves, because of their newness, unheard of through the ages, and also because of the instrument with the benefit of which they make themselves manifest to our sight." (Sidereus Nuncius) Online since 1989, GetEducated cite is one of the most comprehensive and trusted non-commercial higher education directories to accredited online university and college. Their expert advice on online degrees and distance learning has been featured in *Time*, *The New York Times*, *Forbes*, *Fortune*, *US News & World Report*, *CNN*, and *CBS News*, among others. We are witnessing the dawn of a new era in education. In the beginning it will look a lot like what it is replacing, just as early movies were simply filmed plays.

References

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