

Jason Altmire (00:04):

Hello and welcome to another edition of Career Education Report. I'm Jason Altmire, and today, we are going to talk about distance education. Some refer to it as online learning, and we have Dr. Leah Matthews and she is the executive director for the Distance Education Accrediting Commission. And as we all know and experienced, when COVID shut the world down, the attention and focus on distance education became very clear to everyone. But as I think many in higher education recognize, it's not the first time distance education became prevalent and Leah has been working most of her career in this field. So Leah, thank you so much for being with us.

Dr. Leah Matthews (00:54):

You're welcome, Jason. I'm so honored to be here. Thank you for the invitation.

Jason Altmire (00:59):

I wanted to start, and I don't do this for everybody, I'm not going to read your entire bio, but you have such a diverse and interesting background that we're going to get into the discussion and people have a tendency to think, I know I do, when I hear experts pontificate about things, who are these people? What's their background? Where do they come from? Leah Matthews has an incredible background in that she has been in her current position as the executive director for 10 years. And prior to that, she was vice president for Recognition Services at the Council for Higher Education Accreditation where she managed the recognition for 60 accreditors across the country, so nobody more qualified to talk about accreditation.

(01:48):

And before that, she worked for a different accreditor accrediting commission for career schools and colleges. But then it gets interesting, I think. Before that, she worked in Japan for five years as a civilian at the US Army, Japan Headquarters, and she directed family support services and education programs for children again in Japan. And before that, you were a teacher in the Baltimore City Schools system. So you have been on the ground floor of education, you've been overseas, you've worked in accreditation for a long time. I would just start by kind of asking with that background and the way things have evolved, where universally now, people understand about distance education, where do you think we are today based upon where we're going in the future and what's your just overall evaluation of the current state of play?

Dr. Leah Matthews (02:46):

We have certainly come a long way, Jason, in the field of distance education. One thing to mention about the time I spent in Japan from 1992 to 1997 is I was a distance education student in a graduate program when distance education wasn't in its fully online education technology based moment that it is in now. But all of these experiences, whether teaching in an inner city institution or living overseas with our service members side by side, studying with them in a graduate program via distance ed or working directly with institutions and accreditation, just the evolution and movement of education into technology has really been tremendous over the last 20 years.

(03:37):

And one thing that the pandemic certainly did was push distance education and education technology fully into mainstream teaching and learning. And every institution now has learning management systems. They have faculty trained on how to use technology, and students are certainly using it in all aspects of their experiences in higher education, whether they're an on-campus student or an online student or a combination of both. So that there's plenty to talk about and try to digest right now in where things are headed for the future given the rapid pace of evolution over just the last 20 years. Higher ed doesn't change very quickly as you know Jason, but boy, we have certainly seen some significant evolutions.

Jason Altmire ([04:23](#)):

And you have twice represented distance education expertise before federal rulemaking panels, you've talked about it countless times. I've heard you speak about it. Nobody knows more about it. And as executive director of an accreditor for distance education schools, can you talk a little bit about who are your members? Who are you accrediting? What types of schools do you affiliate with?

Dr. Leah Matthews ([04:50](#)):

DEAC is the Distance Education Accrediting Commission, formerly known as the Distance Education and Training Council, DETC. We are in our 96th year of operation in quality assurance for distance education. And so we've sort of spanned the whole evolution of distance education from its roots and correspondence course all the way to today with adaptive learning, AI models of teaching and learning that are starting to rapidly evolve and disrupt what's going on in higher education. DEAC has been the standard setter for remote teaching and learning for how we use education technology in effective ways, how we assess the effectiveness of institutions and delivering online learning while serving students. And we've really tried to be a partner with the accreditation community. We work with our colleagues in the institutional accreditation setting. We also work with college and colleagues in our programmatic and specialized accreditation areas, just sharing our resources, our time, our talent, our evaluator pool, because we see our role as more than just accrediting our institutions, but also being a supportive partner as we kind of move through how education, teaching and learning is changing.

([06:13](#)):

At DEAC, we have roughly a hundred institutions. Most of them are focused on the adult learner and most of our programs are in the graduate level arena because we find adult learners want to find graduate programs, whether certificates or degrees to either enhance or advance themselves professionally. So that's where we are and it's kind of our sweet spot in the graduate arena as well. We have roughly, last count, about 800,000 students across all of our institutions in varying places and their credentials. So it's certainly been an exciting place to be, Jason, for the last 10 years, as distance ed has taken leaps and bounds into how much it's become ingrained in higher education, teaching and learning.

Jason Altmire ([07:02](#)):

And by definition, distance education crosses state boundaries and it's revolutionized the way that students can have the educational experience. You talked about it. It can even be overseas. So what is the way in which you can ensure quality and have accountability for outcomes for schools and for students with regard to crossing state lines.

Dr. Leah Matthews ([07:29](#)):

As you know, distance education is offered across many state boundaries and across the whole geography of the United States. And ever since the 2010 program, integrity rules that came out of the 2008 Higher Education Act, we've been giving a lot of attention to this interstate delivery of distance education. In particular, there's been questions about the rigor of the assessment of these programs on state by state bases, and also how we can maybe simplify and improve the review of distance education institutions that are participating in educating students across state boundaries.

[\(08:08\)](#):

An organization called the National Council for State Authorization and Reciprocity Agreements was formed in 2013 to sort of solve this question about how do we get our arms around distance education activities that are taking place across different state boundaries. States joined NC-SARA to participate in what's called a Reciprocity Agreement, and the council for NC-SARA is sort of the steward for these agreements that are formed and developed through the regional compact system and that exercised by the states and allowing institutions to participate in reciprocity. You spoke to the question of how do we assure quality, that assurance comes from individual states they're reviewing distance education. It also comes from a reliance on accreditation to review distance ed programs, to review their outcomes, to review their platforms for appropriateness, to look at how faculty are trained and developed in delivering on these educational programs.

Jason Altmire [\(09:15\)](#):

You mentioned the NC-SARA and that acronym, National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements. So these reciprocity agreements are agreements across states that when distance learning crosses state lines, there is a mechanism to decide what is the commonly accepted standard for that level of education so that it doesn't vary by state. It would make distance learning impossible if every state had a different mechanism and every student from every state had a different authorization.

Dr. Leah Matthews [\(09:55\)](#):

Right, and I would add, Jason, that we were certainly in that situation from 2010 until NC-SARA was formed. If you were a distance at institution, you had to go to each individual state and gain their approval to operate within their jurisdiction. Now, I think it's important to mention that many of your members are in California, and California is not a member of the NC-SARA system. So institutions in California that are offering distance education outside of those state boundaries have to go to each individual state to secure authorization to operate distance education there. One more point I want to make, Jason, is that state authorization reciprocity is only available to degree-granting institutions. And so your members that are listening to this today that are not offering degrees know that they still have to go state by state to get authorization for any distance education they're operating outside of their state jurisdictions.

Jason Altmire [\(11:03\)](#):

And it's really important to consider this point because A, California being the only state in the country that does not participate, we all understand California is the biggest state in the country by a wide margin, and the fact that they're not participating causes huge problems for distance education just in and of itself. But another issue that's happening politically is there is an attempt by some to get into the mix on how NC-SARA works and change the rules. Can you talk a little bit about what's going on there?

Dr. Leah Matthews ([11:40](#)):

I can talk a little bit about it, Jason. I'm certainly not on the inside of that conversation, but there have been announcements by the Department of Education that they are revisiting state authorization reciprocity as a way to meet those 2010 Program Integrity rules for institutions having proper authorization to operate in any state where they enroll students. Those conversations are given consideration as to whether NC-SARA remains a viable activity to monitor and assure education quality in distance education.

[\(12:18\)](#):

So certainly, we have to be prepared to answer the department's questions about accountability and student protections and how we can make sure that institutions delivering distance education fulfill their obligations to students. I know that NC-SARA has been developing their policy process and they have become far more extensive in their comment, appearance and their activities that engage different constituencies in participating in conversations about their policies and standards. They're working with their regional compacts and also the state representatives themselves. So this is something in the next cycle of negotiated rulemaking, Jason, that I think will get attention again, and we may have a lot of the same debates that we had in 2014 when we hammered this out. My hope is that it can be preserved.

Jason Altmire ([13:15](#)):

This effort is being driven, just to add some color to this, primarily by critics of the for-profit sector of higher education. Their way of looking at it is that they view... We certainly do not subscribe to this point of view, but I think the way they would articulate it is that for-profit schools should be held to a higher standard that the rules should be different and in some cases, for-profit schools should not be able to participate in distance education at all. I guess what I would ask you based upon, I talked about your long history in this and I really believe nobody knows more about it than you do, what is your observation of is there a difference between the quality of education based upon the sector that's offering it?

Dr. Leah Matthews ([14:01](#)):

Jason, my experience to... My answer is no. All institutions have review by the same authorizing entity in the state, and many of them have accreditation through either formerly known as regional accreditation or nationally organized accreditors that run through the same sets of standards through the recognition processes, sort of frames how accreditation operates. I would also say that whether an institution is organized on a tax paying basis or any other kind of tax structure, the education technologies that are behind these systems are very much the same. And many of these learning platform systems, let's say Canvas for an example, I mean these are for-profit organizations, our online program management systems are for-profit.

[\(14:58\)](#):

And so I would say let's stop looking at the financial structures in the background and focus more on evidence of student learning, evidence of student achievement and success of those students after they've left their programs and how they've entered into their professions and gone on with their degree credentials. We're just running around measuring the wrong things, Jason, in my opinion, and we could be spending so much more of our efforts and attentions on student learning and evidence of that

learning rather than worrying about how something is structured to the extent that we have been. That's not to say these things shouldn't be looked at, but it seems they have been given higher priority than the actual learning evidence and measuring that than we have been.

Jason Altmire ([15:52](#)):

I mentioned earlier that COVID in 2020 alerted the rest of the world to something that some people in higher education already knew, which is that higher education can be delivered at a very high quality level through distance learning. Certainly, you've spent many years, decades, working on that very issue and now, three years on from the pandemic, what do you think the public perception is? Do you think there's a greater acceptance of distance learning? Because we're certainly not going back.

Dr. Leah Matthews ([16:29](#)):

Exactly, and I think that acceptance is coming from a cohort of students who, in high school, started to experience distance education because of remote learning being required. So you have a generation of students that are already prepared to work with education technologies and are expecting it. So distance education in a blended format is part of almost every college experience now. I have a son who is going to be a sophomore in college next year, and he, through his freshman year, had a lot of the elements of distance education baked into the curriculum and the systems that his faculty and instructional teams were working with at his university.

([17:18](#)):

I think it's now learning alongside distance education as opposed to distance education as sort of this separate thing and this separate activity that the university does. It's entrenched and it's not going away, and so that's why we have to focus our efforts on how effective are the delivery systems in distance education? Are we measuring how students are learning? Are we making sure our faculty have the tools and the training and the orientations that they need, and are we constantly engaged in a feedback loop of improvement assessment and quality review? And that's where we need to be focusing our efforts as we're kind of going forward with all of these new technologies.

Jason Altmire ([18:02](#)):

When you think about the disruption that those technologies have had on all of our lives in every possible way, from iPhones to streaming services to what we're talking about right now in higher education and certainly AI, which everybody is talking about and focusing on, where are we going in the future with this as it relates to online learning and distance education?

Dr. Leah Matthews ([18:27](#)):

I certainly think artificial intelligence, Jason, is going to play a major role in sort of the next generation of online teaching and learning. We need to work alongside artificial intelligence, not against it. We need to learn how to incorporate it effectively into our classrooms, whether they're on campus or online. And we need to kind of look at how students marshal and leverage resources at the universities to learn how to engage with these developments in AI, how to use them appropriately and intelligently and thoughtfully going into the future. That's going to be the next major disruption in higher education. I think the disruption of online learning is over. I think the next disruption is going to be these evolving education technologies that are generated through artificial intelligence and certainly raising questions

about how faculty should be taking appropriate steps in the future to incorporate these into their classrooms. It's going to be very, very interesting, and we're going to have to rapidly grow some experts in these fields.

Jason Altmire ([19:33](#)):

Our guest today has been Dr. Leah Matthews. She is the Executive Director of the Distance Education Accrediting Commission. Dr. Matthews, thank you for being with us.

Dr. Leah Matthews ([19:44](#)):

Jason, it's been a pleasure. Thank you for everything you're doing for students and institutions. At DEAC, we really admire the work you're doing with your fine team at CECU. Thanks for having me.

Jason Altmire ([19:58](#)):

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Speaker 3 ([20:36](#)):

[inaudible 00:20:36].