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INTERVIEW

Speaking Personally—With Eugene Rubin

Dr. Eugene Rubin is the chair of the Master of Distance Education Program, Graduate School of Management and Technology, University of Maryland University College (UMUC). He was interviewed by Alberto Ramirez, director of Instructional Technology at Frederick Community College, Frederick, Maryland.

Alberto Ramirez: Dr. Rubin, where are we going in terms of converging technologies such as WebCT and Blackboard?

Eugene Rubin: It's getting more complicated by the day, so it's more difficult to make predictions that you feel comfortable with. Interacting with students, as you know from your own courses, forces you to look at things from a different perspective.

One of my students recently said, "You know, convergence in distance education may be a thing that really won't happen at all." It's mostly the traditional institutions that like to talk about convergence, not the distance learning institutions. Because distance learning institutions are serving a public that never really will be served by the traditional institutions, there will always be the need for increased access. They won't all move toward distributed learning.

Convergence may be better discussed in terms of being a more global aspect of education in the United States and in the world, for that matter—particularly in relation to traditional universities. You could argue that traditional universities are becoming more like distance learning universities and not the opposite. And that is where the convergence is. The convergence is what's happening in the classroom. Traditional universities suddenly are able to use the technology in the same way that distance learning universities have used it in the past.

AR: What do you call a distance learning institution? Is that UMUC?

ER: UMUC is beginning to approximate one, but we are not there quite yet. Some examples are the British Open University, the German FernUniversität, and the Spanish Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia. There are three or four in South America and Central America; these are institutions that you would call single-mode institutions, and UMUC is much closer to being a dual-mode institution, which is more like an Australian institution, actually. Most other institutions are not distance institutions at all; they are traditional institutions that have hung a little piece of distance education on themselves. It is still always looked at as an adjunct to the traditional process.

About 85 percent of UMUC's graduate programs are online now, and I think just over 50 percent of its undergraduate programs are online. So you can't really say that distance education is an add-on aspect to the institution and that characterization of UMUC—compared to, let's just say, to other institutions in the Maryland system—is not necessarily a bad one at all. It could very well be that the University of Maryland Baltimore County or some other institution like Frostburg State University decides that, in fact, they have a target population that they want to con-

tinue serving, and they see distance education as a tool to do that. That's fine. But maybe their main business isn't, and shouldn't be, distance education, and I think that it's confusing when you hear the discussion about distance education and people are talking about how some of the traditional institutions should get on board or they'll lose out.

That may be true for some institutions but certainly not all of them. It doesn't make sense to even talk about it like that. Particularly, for example, in a community college here in Maryland. They traditionally had a geographic area they serve that's beginning to change a little bit, but they will always have a geographic mandate—always.

AR: Amazingly, statistics show that our distance learning population remains over 90 percent local students.

ER: Sure.

AR: It's a way to be flexible for adult learners, something that we didn't have before.

ER: Exactly.

AR: We have identified our distance learning population as adult learners. In future generations, learners will be much more savvy as they grow with the technology. How do you see this impacting us, in distance learning? On one side, some of the faculty are aging; on the other, new faculty are coming aboard, and the new technologically savvy learners keep coming, even if they are young adults or adults. Do you think this will be an effect on the demands of the students?

ER: That's another hard one. I think that, by hook or by crook, the faculty is managing to keep even with the adult population they are serving, so in a sense my students are not too different from myself. They have not grown up with computers, but computers were introduced in their adult life; and so although they have a certain comfort with it, they have not merged with the technology. My sixteen-year-old daughter sits in front of AOL Instant Messenger and does stuff that doesn't feel natural for some; she talks on it as if she is talking on the telephone. That's a very different feel. I don't deal with e-mail like that, but she does. So that is coming up. But I feel it will be coming up with faculty, too. I don't think that, in fact, this is a problem for distance education faculty; it is going to be more of a problem for the traditional faculty. Remember, we are not talking educational technology in higher education; we are talking about education technology in distance education.

The average age of my students is thirty-five to forty years old. So in that sense we won't have these kinds of problems with the faculty. But it may mean that the student population that engages in distance education will become younger—that more and more students, instead of working for ten years and then going back for a master's degree, will get out of school, start working, and go back right away for a master's degree. If that happens, then we are pushing the average age down, and maybe you're right: their skills in technology will exceed the faculty's skills.

You know I am answering these questions from two different perspectives: one is the perspective of an educator—that is, an adult educator; the other is from a perspective of the chair of the Master of Distance Education program, which is different because most of the faculty in my program have been involved in distance education and technology for a while. So, for example, my program uses the least amount of support from our technical support people; the technology is part of our disciplinary knowledge. That is not true of

other programs in the graduate school, so when I look at it from the distance education perspective, I would not be worried about that at all.

AR: Would you say that the trend in distance education is for faculty and students to self-select and that distance education is not for everyone?

ER: I would not call it a trend. Yes, there is definitely self-selection. There are many people who would not go near a computer to try to get a graduate degree, so that is true. Yes, students do self-select when they make these decisions. On the other hand, I am not sure that kind of self-selection hasn't been around for a while. In independent study, which was a former iteration of distance education, these were self-selected people also. There are other people who feel they just can't do it. They can't regulate their own life enough to be able to manage and get their degree. I think that kind of self-selection goes on all the time. You could argue that students self-select for face-to-face instruction, too. I'm not sure that there is a trend, per se. I just think you need to recognize the fact that self-selection goes on and to understand what that market is.

AR: What can we do to prepare faculty who are in transition towards these programs in a logical manner, so that there is not so much emphasis on the technology? Okay, they learn to use the Web, but what other elements of preparation should we emphasize?

ER: My answer to that is we don't need to educate the faculty. We need to educate college and university presidents and academic vice presidents because they are the people who allocate the resources and they are the people who make these decisions. Those decisions will never get made unless you have buy-in at that level.

AR: Tell us about some of UMUC's history. How and when did it become involved in distance education?

ER: Way back when, UMUC was the adult education portion of University of Maryland at College Park. Following World War II, they had the opportunity to begin delivering university education to the U.S. military overseas. That was way back in 1947, and back then, when you were in the military, you went to the University of Maryland. The University of Maryland University College became a separate institution, but they never knew the difference. They went to the University of Maryland, but really they were going to the University of Maryland University College.

So, originally it was the University of Maryland, and then it became UMUC in the late 1960s. The military contract became a huge piece of the university, and once we got the contract we worked really hard to keep it. We re-bid on that contract every five years and we held on to it. As a result, the military work is a foundation for what we do now. For a long time, the military piece was larger than the civilian piece. In the 1980s and 1990s, we began to significantly increase the civilian piece, and now it has somewhat reversed itself, with our civilian education being the dominant side of the institution.

AR: Would you say that some of the same things in that experience with military contracts forced everybody to build this really tight infrastructure dealing with contracts and payments and those experiences can be used to your advantage now?

ER: Yes, and moreover keep in mind up until—I think it was three or four years ago—we never received a significant sub-

sidy from the state legislature. So we have more or less acted as a completely self-supported institution. This is quite different from most state universities and it served us well to have that experience so we know how to run an institution that can sustain itself.

In a sense we have one gigantic contract with the Department of Defense, but we are not like the University of Maryland at College Park. We don't have tons of money from different foundations and from the National Institutes of Health. In fact, our experience is pretty thin in that area.

AR: We need to know how to train the institutional government and faculty. A faculty member may be faced with concession if he or she is used to doing things face-to-face and then suddenly says, "I want to teach online." How do we ease that transition?

ER: Let me talk about it from several different perspectives. One is the fact that we don't have a huge full-time faculty. We have a very large adjunct faculty and you might argue that this is different from traditional institutions. But every institution in the country is increasing its part-time faculty, so this is not a trivial issue anymore. So I will talk about it from that perspective. I will also talk about it from the perspective of UMUC being perhaps more of a top-down institution. We have been a fairly strongly managed institution because of our military contract, so there is an accepted view in the institution that we are run more like a business, perhaps. It's probably correct, and for many years we didn't have anything like a faculty senate, and it is because full-time faculty were really hired primarily as managers, not as faculty—even though we have the credentials of the faculty. As a result of being in that kind of environment, you can look a faculty member in the eye and you can look an adjunct faculty member in the eye and you say to them, "You will get trained or you are not working for us." Now when you put training in that kind of a context, it changes a lot of the barriers you think you have.

AR: And it works?

ER: Yes it does. We have very extensive training here, but it's simply a requirement. You are not going to teach online until you get that piece of paper that says you've completed the training. That's one issue that I would bring up if I were giving a talk among a group of academic vice presidents. I would say, "Maybe you need to think about whether or not you are going to mandate it to your faculty. I don't think you are stepping on anybody's toes in terms of academic freedom by requiring certain training. If you can require training in sexual harassment, you can require training in pedagogy." Higher education is one of the few areas where the faculty and the university automatically are seen as having knowledge of how to teach. It is automatically assumed that if you work in higher education, if you work in a university, if you work in a community college, then you know how to teach. That's your job, right? Yet what percentage of those people have ever had actual formal training in that? Probably less than 1 percent. The assumption is that training in your discipline automatically gives you the authority to teach. That is a difficult idea to overcome. Are you somehow automatically a teacher if you have a doctorate or master's degree?

AR: This is interesting. We are probably going to implement this fall the issuing of certificates or one document to the faculty that says this person reached this level of training and that will reflect also in the review of their salaries, pay scale area. So that is added to their portfolio, which they use now for assessment.

ER: I don't doubt that at an institution like Harvard or Penn State, you might have some trouble implementing that sort of approach, but in the long run, you will have to move in that direction. At UMUC, at least in our distance education area, we started mandatory training in technology back before the end of 1994.

A number of years ago we used the University of Maryland videoconferencing system, and we were the heaviest user of that system. We had a mandatory training program—it was about thirty or forty hours—and we actually had people from other institutions who asked to go through it. When we first started online, it was before the Web and we used direct dial-up. In fact, one of the reasons we still have our own proprietary platform is that we started before any of the commercial platforms were developed. There were a few other products that were on the market at that point, but none was really robust. For example, the CoSY conferencing system was being used and was a command line conferencing system, a difficult one to use. Once we started using our own platform, we developed a five-week mandatory online training program supplemented with some face-to-face stuff. We even developed a CD-ROM to support our faculty at a distance. It probably takes a good forty hours, maybe more.

AR: That's before anybody else.

ER: Yes, and you are not allowed to teach online unless you have that or the equivalent. And there are other training efforts. For example, we have a mentoring process that we have implemented in my program for most new faculty members, where the first course is taught jointly with me or another experienced faculty member. The new faculty member watches me as a role model. It is a kind of mentoring, assuming, of course, I am doing it the right way. We have a formal mentoring program in the institution too, but it is a little bit different from that.

AR: How are your courses designed? You are talking about faculty in the teaching aspects, but most of faculty are, in fact, the course designers and have a great deal of ownership in the course that they've designed and feel only they can teach. Do you use a different system?

ER: Creating and teaching courses in a university have very traditional roots. Most courses at a university look a lot like courses at other universities. Why? First of all, one could argue that most of the faculty do it this way—that's the way it always has been done. But maybe it doesn't have to be that way. It's not that we don't go through this debate and a lot of angst over this stuff, about what our course development model should be. We just went through a whole institutional analysis of this thing, and we did not get anywhere on it because there was a lot of investment in the existing system. People have lots of investment in the good old days and the good old ways we have done things for years. It is hard to change.

For example, on the undergraduate level, we use a team development model, and it is a classic distance education materials development model. There are always materials that are developed for each course, often independent of the person who teaches the course. In the graduate school we use a different model. My adjunct faculty develop their own courses. What they really develop up front is their own extended syllabi. But it is important to ask the question "What is a course?" How are you defining a course?

In our undergraduate model, it's defined as a set of materials and that is a very classic traditional distance education model of a course. It's a set of materials

that has been developed by a team: an instructional designer, a content expert, and others. But this is defining a course as primarily a set of instructional materials.

In the Masters of Distance Education program, we define a course as a set of activities and a set of interactions between faculty and the students. As far as we are concerned, most of the materials already exist in the literature. We don't write lectures. We ask students to read the literature. That's not to say that we don't occasionally write materials that wouldn't be put on the Web. I am not implying that. I am just saying that's not our main way of creating and delivering courses. In our program, our main way of delivering courses is through discussion and activities, exercises, and assignments, and that is a very different kind of model.

It is much harder to look at that model within a team context. You can use a team to do it, but traditionally the team was used for development of the set of materials. So it depends on how you define what a course is. A course is purely an entity that was defined from about 1920 or 1930 to the present day as a set of events that happened at a university. Who is to say that is the right way to do it? The Web has allowed us to create courses that traditionally, in distance education, you couldn't do before. The reason you couldn't do it is that you didn't have the ability to effectively communicate. What the Web has brought to us is a way of communicating. In fact, in my program, that is primarily the way we use the Web. It is to communicate. We don't use it to display materials.

AR: I think you just addressed some of the core differences between distance learning and the conventional way of having a class delivered. One is the intense communication factor; another one is the new set of issues facing faculty. How do you advise or support a regular faculty member with a traditional approach to teaching? By mandating, however this is understood, how to conduct a class based on its ownership by the institution? All these concepts you talked about may be different for undergraduate or graduate courses. But shifting back to the undergraduate aspects: it could be hard for the faculty used to more generic information and activities to suddenly face the needs of individual communication with the students, and that could be very intense for them. I think that this is one of the things that I find hard to convey to some faculty, because until they live it, they don't really see how distance learning is different.

ER: Yes, let's get back to that for the moment because now we are talking about organizations or institutions that have permanent faculty. With an adjunct you could always say if you can't do it or won't learn it or you won't do this for us, we are not going to hire you. You can't do that with permanent faculty. But with permanent faculty, chances are that you will have a limited array of different pedagogies that these faculty use in a face-to-face context regardless of how people may deny it. A significant portion of that array tends to be one-way communication. It tends to be the faculty member who gets up in front of the class and talks to the class for whatever reason. Yes, people can talk forever about all the positive things that can happen in a face-to-face classroom. The fact is a large portion of the communication in many classes is one way. Students can speak only one at a time; they often alternate with the faculty member and, unless you have special seminars, you don't usually have students talking to students.

All the desks point to the front of the class. There are exceptions, but this tends to be true. If that is so, then you have a much bigger hurdle to get over because your pedagogy is essentially a transmis-

sion pedagogy. Then you're going to have a faculty member who is going to struggle with the changeover to one that is two-way, maybe three-, five-, ten-, or twenty-way. If you have that barrier, it's much more difficult for a trainer. It may be that the ultimate solution is that those people don't make the transition to online learning or distance education. And that solution is a tough one because faculty associations will raise issues about this. Those are things we have to work out, but you may have to accept the fact that maybe you just can't train all of your faculty. But on the other hand, there are other faculty who show that they know what they are doing and they are going to have an easier changeover. They are not the people you need to train; they are the people you need to support. That's the difference. There is a difference between support and training.

AR: My next question will be about the student perspective. Statistically, nationwide, we have a certain number for attrition in distance learning. UMUC probably has one of the lowest rates of attrition nationwide, but many other institutions show that many students drop out of the distance learning process. We don't know why. We haven't pinpointed whether it's the faculty, the technology, or the academics that needs to be self-directed. What can you tell us about that in your experience with undergrad and graduate students?

ER: Well, keep in mind that I have a background that goes way back. I worked for Athabasca University in Canada for thirteen years, and that is a single-mode institution, primarily print-based, supported by telephone. I discovered a couple of things over time, and one is that dropout is somewhat dependent upon the model of delivery—that is, if the institution is a paced institution, like most traditional institutions, it runs on its own calendar—its own time frame, such as terms or semesters—and students either buy into that time frame or they don't; they either register for a course for a specific time or they don't. That is one kind of pacing. Then there is another kind of pacing, called unpaced instruction, which is much more similar to that of Athabasca University. There are a few like that in the United States—I think Northern Virginia Community College has a little piece that is unpaced—but interestingly it is the community colleges that seem to have that, as opposed to four-year universities.

Anyway, if you have an unpaced institution, then the course is at the student's pace, and so dropout is different. It is worse, actually, in an unpaced institution, but on the other hand, an unpaced institution allows a certain population of students to attend school that wouldn't attend in a paced institution. We talk about the self-selection that occurs in distance education, but there is even a further self-selection in terms of pacing and nonpacing. Some students can't manage a two-and-a-half or three-month term and need to be able to go at their own rate, and some students can't tolerate that. Athabasca was founded as an unpaced institution. It doesn't have a high completion rate, but it takes a different view of what a dropout is and what it means.

Is a dropout a person who decides, long after graduating from high school, to try a university course and then finds out that "this is not for me"? Maybe not. If a person has a death in the family and decides not to continue, is that a dropout? I don't know. We tend to think about dropouts from an institutional statistics perspective, and this may not match at all what students' intentions are. A student who says, "I don't think I want to continue" is very different from a student who says, "I can't continue." They are both dropouts, yet one makes the decision

whereas, for the other, the decision is made for him or her.

Dropout is a difficult issue. Even so, I think that the issue of dropout is highly related to the issue of student support—but student support in ways that we don't traditionally think of it. I had a student just write to me by e-mail: "Dear Dr. Rubin, sorry I haven't been working on the course. I am also taking another course. I just had a death in the family. It has just drained all the energy out of me. I think I really need an extension for the next assignment. I hope you can help me out." My reaction to the student is what I would classify as student support, not as teaching faculty. My reaction to her was something like "I am really sorry to hear about your loss. I know these things can be energy draining. Normally I give forty-eight hours. Will that help? Do you need any more?" I didn't think twice about an extension because I know that most distance education students, if they are anything like me just trying to be a faculty in a distance education course, are overextended anyway.

Do we normally talk about this kind of faculty–student exchange as student support? No, we don't. Student support is library services and counseling. But in fact those are the very things that keep students in school. I have had students tell me that they would never have come back to graduate school were it not for the way I answered their first e-mail asking about the program. That made me realize the importance of what I say to students.

Of course, a number of times just the opposite has happened to me. Once, I sent a comment to a student, and then that student rather publicly announced in one of the conferences in my course that he was quite upset about my response. Then I went back and apologized because the student had taken it very personally online.

Here is another issue: Imagine that a student takes a course in Term 1, doesn't take one in Term 2, takes another course in Term 3, doesn't take one in Terms 4 or 5, comes back and takes one in Term 6. Is that student a dropout at any point? In any traditional institution, such a student would be. Well, we define a nonactive student at UMUC as a student who has not taken a course in the last three terms. Adult part-time students are in and out. So if a student takes a course once every three terms, he or she is still an active student, but you can't tell by taking a snapshot at any one point what dropout rate is.

Your dropout rate is a moving window. It's very hard to research the dropout topic. We can't even research our own data very well because you need to look at some very complex patterns to see what the behaviors of the students are. In my own program, I am struggling with this issue. It is also very relevant to the process of trying to predict enrollment for any one term—because I have to get my faculty in place to teach all of this. How do I plan for that? Another question would be to ask me how many students I have in my program. I don't know. Does that sound stupid for a department chair?

AR: That's a great question.

ER: If I count only those who have registered in the last three terms, then I can give you a number—325. But I actually had a student just the other day who wrote me back saying, "I took a course two years ago and I had to drop out for some reason, and now I want to come back and start again. Can I do that?" Well, at UMUC you can; you have seven years to do it in. But again, for most institutions, that student is a dropout.

AR: So that is a wonderful description of an important concept from adult learning. You do have seven years, but in fact students can come in and out as their names

come and go, and I think dropout a lot of times in our traditional institutions is so geared from state funding sources because they want this rate and they want it to go higher.

ER: They want the time degree to be shorter. These are interesting issues about dropout and, in conclusion, we desperately need research in this area and we need it in a way that people can generalize from. So it is somewhat difficult because each institution defines it differently, each institution operates a little bit differently.

AR: There is a lot of stuff on dropout within a course but not in a program.

ER: Remember when you were getting your degree and people met you and asked, "What are you doing?" You wouldn't say, "I am taking a course"; you would say something like "I am in a master's program" or "I am in a Ph.D. program." This brings up a whole other issue, which you might find interesting, and that is, how do you define your community? The community in which you participate—how do you define that? The question to a student might be "What are you doing?" His answer might be "I am a graduate student" or "I am working on my undergraduate degree." That is the most common or logical definition of the community that he would be in. But in distance education, those communities don't exist. If you are in Texas and you are pursuing a degree from UMUC, the community is often your courses, not your program. That is a problem. That is a serious problem, because critics of distance education often ask, "How do you make the experience of distance education comparable to the face-to-face classroom?" You automatically know that there are some differences in the way we communicate—the way we mediate things—but it also has to do with that sense of community, which, in turn, has a lot to do with dropout.

The thing that affects students the most in my program, when they are having difficulty, is finding other students who have similar problems and being able to communicate with them—getting support from them, not from me, but from the other students. And I see it happen in classrooms when another student will say, "Don't worry about that. I have this same kind of problem. This is how I deal with it." The first student says, "Gosh, I thought that I was all alone in this—I thought I was the only person who didn't understand the readings." Then you find that half the class didn't understand the readings. So this idea of community is very important. This is another concept that we are trying to come to terms with. We haven't done really well with that in my program—or most other distance education programs, for that matter.

I started out with the view, first of all, that there should be a Web site associated with the program. That Web site was needed to offer the students not only the course syllabi, and all the announcements, but professional development opportunities, what the job market was like, who the faculty are and their biographies, and interesting additional information about distance education. But even that doesn't do the job. That is, it's not that you don't need that stuff, it's just that it doesn't necessarily provide the community. The community would be served if you could provide a way of interchange. What did you do when you were in graduate school? You walked by the office, you looked at the bulletin board, you saw what's going on, you talked to people in the hall. How do you do similar things online? That is tough. As a distance educator, you can put a bulletin board up or some kind of computer conference up to try to solve a problem. But you find that students don't use it, because they don't have any real reason

to. It is a waste of their time, yet walking by the office is not a waste of their time—because usually they go down there for a reason. Students are willing to chat in the hallway but not online.

AR: You know what is interesting? We have chat rooms available, and I can pull up the log and see a number of people check in almost every day. I checked just this morning and found people "walking by." Your analogy of walking by—that is exactly what they are doing.

ER: There is another aspect to it, though, that I want to add. I am a great believer in asynchronous education, but I am believing more and more in some synchronous events. I think one of the most useful tools is teleconferencing. It is one that every student can access easily, and it really helps a student to be able to hear other students and ask questions, and so in a number of our courses we schedule regular teleconferences—maybe once or twice a term.

AR: Does the student have to pay for that?

ER: No. It is a toll-free number. We just got a new system called MeetingPlace, which is produced by Latitude, that allows you to not only use the telephone but also to use the Web site for sharing of applications and using the chat room, but I like teleconferencing, personally, over Web-based synchronous communication. The quality is a lot higher.

AR: What about a doctorate in distance education? Would you consider offering a doctorate at a distance in your discipline?

ER: If you were to poll most distance educators, I would think that the set of operating assumptions that they have in common is shaped by the concept of access. I think that most people who are professional distance educators understand that the main strength of distance education is that it provides access. Remember, I am talking about higher education; I am not talking about e-learning and corporate education, necessarily. If the concept of access is a central one, and it is with me, then starting a doctoral program causes some interesting access issues. In my mind, the rationale for providing a doctorate at a distance is to provide access to those who cannot presently access a doctoral program. Otherwise, why would I want to bother? There are plenty of doctoral programs out there that you can go and be in residence for. So if I am going to provide access that argues that there should not be arbitrary limits on the size of the program. That is, you don't want to sit there and say there are one hundred seats available and we have two thousand applicants, therefore we need to cut that down. You might very well be cutting out well-qualified people. UMUC right now operates on the assumption that previous success predicts future success. So if you have a certain grade point on your undergraduate programs, you get into graduate school. Then you sink or swim, more or less. We give you the access, the opportunity, and then you have to prove yourself based on that. The rationale is that your undergraduate program average is something that will predict your future success, not entrance exams and stuff like that.

Think about it at a doctoral level, too. How will you let people into a doctoral program if you believe in access? Well, you don't arbitrarily have a limited number and say too bad to all those other people who may be qualified. That doesn't mean you can't put qualifications in there; it just means that for everyone who meets those qualifications, do you offer a space? Well, if you do, that changes the dynamics of a doctoral program radically, and the

reason is that doctoral programs are based on an individual one-on-one relationship, a mentoring relationship—with the dissertation advisor essentially—and so you can handle only so many of those, given the size of your faculty. It raises many issues, and those are questions that should be asked about any doctoral program that is offered at a distance. So it is possible, for example, to have a doctoral program in distance education, delivered by distance education, where only one hundred spaces a year are available. I could do that, but in a way I feel down in my heart that I am violating some basic principles of what distance education is all about: opening opportunities.

AR: You provide access, but you also require some measure of excellence.

ER: Yes.

AR: The measure of excellence has to be built into how you select your candidates.

ER: Of course. I don't see anything wrong with having to have high qualifications required to get into a doctoral program, but suppose hundreds of people met those qualifications. Do you arbitrarily say, "No, sorry, first come first served"? So far, with the master's program, we haven't had to do that. The numbers keep going up. With an adjunct faculty, we are not limited by seats.

AR: How many in a course per instructor?

ER: Maximum thirty.

AR: It could be a handful.

ER: Oh yes. Online, thirty could be a handful.

AR: Do you use teaching assistants or any support?

ER: No, although we have courses that can use teaching assistants and you can request it. But usually you don't have to. There are a whole lot of other issues having to do with faculty workload and the relationship of pedagogies to how much work is generated for the faculty member. All that kind of stuff is very complicated.

AR: Do you deal a lot with your copyright issues, or do you have your policies so well established that you don't have to? For example, with your relationship with Oldenburg University. [Note: Oldenburg University in Germany is the partner of UMUC in the Master of Distance Education program.]

ER: We don't have any problems; in fact, some Germans tend to believe in copy "left," which means open access rights. They have written on this. But Oldenburg goes along with UMUC, and UMUC has a policy of paying for copyright, and so we try to convince people who own copyrighted material that, in fact, they should allow us to use it online. The Distance Education Systems course, for example, uses almost all articles; there are no textbooks in the area. There are few chapters but rather 70, 80, 100 articles that students have to read and that we have to supply.

AR: You supply them electronically, right?

ER: Yes.

AR: Dr. Rubin, thank you for sharing your insights.

ER: My pleasure.