A Proposal That Cornell Offer Its Graduates a Maintenance Contract on the Degree That They Have Earned.

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In many disciplines, knowledge is being discovered at a rate that results in the half-life of the currentness of a College degree being numbered in a small number of years. It is undoubtedly also true that in every discipline, the content of the curriculum changes every year. It is proposed that Cornell offer its graduates a maintenance contract warranting that students subscribing to the service and completing the body of work prescribed will maintain the currentness of their Cornell degree.

Of the many distributed education initiatives that a University could undertake, this initiative should be the easiest to pull off. The faculty will be dealing with bright students whose knowledge base is known to them, and who are capable of working independently. Contrast this with the hardest problem: trying to teach undergraduate courses to students that the faculty has not met and whose study skills and knowledge base is largely unknown to them. A program of this sort should also result in long term benefits to the Alumni Office. Alumni staff have noted that the longer graduates go without significant interaction with the institution, the less likely it is that significant annual giving will occur.

Most of the information required to implement this can be distributed via the web and would consist of course notes or pointers to articles or books that the graduate should read. When new courses are offered that the graduate would have taken as a current student, the challenges are somewhat greater but again the ability to distribute written, audio and video material over the web should permit a remote student to master the material. Since 180 institutions now have, or soon will have, high speed network connections, it is also possible for students to be connected to live interactive video presentations at regional sites, minimizing travel requirements. It may be necessary for the student to return to campus periodically

If there is interest in this initiative by a faculty, the faculty should be able to design a program that would work for them. Perhaps an experiment in which a few disciplines offered this plan to students graduating in May might be desirable. A student survey would certainly determine the level of student interest. It is probable, given the growing importance of lifelong learning, that a foundation could be found that would fund the start up of this program, so that the cost to students in the first few years of this effort would be based on long term revenue expectations rather than trying to break even in year one. Maybe students should not be charged for the first year of this service after graduation.