In April, the U.S. Department of Commerce announced its intent to reach an agreement in which EDUCAUSE, on behalf of the higher education community, will manage the top-level Internet domain .edu. This agreement recognizes the special importance of the Internet for higher education today, as well as the critical role that the Internet will play in the future world of distributed learning.

The History of .edu
The .edu domain is one of the original top-level subdivisions of the Internet domain-name system. It refers primarily to regionally accredited U.S. institutions of higher education. Membership in these domain subdivisions was initially managed by the National Science Foundation (NSF) as part of its general oversight of several critical components that, in effect, stitched together the underlying naming and linking structure of the Internet. The subsequent explosive growth of the Internet and its migration into the broader world of government and commerce led to the transition of its operational management from the NSF to the new Internet industry and of the domain name system from the NSF to the Department of Commerce.

In recent years, the Department of Commerce has sought to shift management of the appropriate parts of the domain name system to private organizations, most notably through the creation of ICANN, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (http://www.icann.org), a new organization with a global focus. The “legacy” domain .edu remained with the Department of Commerce during this process. According to the recent agreement, .edu will now be managed by EDUCAUSE in cooperation with the Department of Commerce.

The Importance of .edu to Higher Education
The Internet has long been important on campus as a means for communicating and for sharing information. Over the past ten years, it has completely transformed research, libraries, and regional and global collaborations in higher education. More recently, the Internet has promised similar benefits for the core activity of colleges and universities—education—by greatly extending the reach of teachers and the access and power of students.

Of further significance, higher education institutions led the dramatic shift to the Internet by developing a student-friendly, Web-based presence to better serve the needs of existing students, as well as to inform and attract future students. Colleges and universities are now beginning to offer a wide variety of academic seminars, classes, programs, and degrees directly through the Internet.

In this setting, the .edu domain name of a campus is important as a way of stating that an institution is a recognized member of the higher education community and that the institution meets the community’s standards of degrees and accreditation. This sign of recognition will be all the more critical as more and more teaching and learning is conducted through the Internet via “e-learning.”

The Management of .edu by EDUCAUSE
EDUCAUSE is recognized as the organization that represents the policy, strategy, and operations interests of networking and information technology in U.S. higher education. It is a nonprofit organization of more than 1,800 academic institutions and corporate partners, including most of the top IT leaders in universities, colleges, and community colleges in the United States. EDUCAUSE provides the largest forum in which IT leaders of higher education can meet to adopt and develop Internet applications that promise to transform the way students are educated in the future. Thus the recent agreement can truly be viewed as one in which the members of a top-level domain will be able to represent themselves in the domain’s management.

The Environment of .edu and the EDUCAUSE Agreement
The most significant change adopted in the agreement between the Department of Commerce and EDUCAUSE is to allow U.S. community colleges to use .edu domain names. This reflects the critical position of community colleges in the overall U.S. system of higher education, as well as their vital role in the development of online education. Another change will be the creation of a public process for suggesting and discussing possible modifications to the membership rules of the domain.

Through these actions and others, EDUCAUSE hopes to guide the .edu domain as it evolves as required to remain relevant and valuable far into the future. For further details, please see <http://www.educause.edu/edudomain/>.

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