Accreditation and Assessment in Distance Learning

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Abstract

All accredited institutions in the United States that are involved in distance learning initiatives need to be concerned about how their programs and courses will be viewed by accreditation organizations. A review of the policies of several major accreditation associations and professional groups, national, regional and specialized, yields similar results when issues of distance learning are concerned. These requirements are reviewed. Virtually all accreditors require evidence of regular assessment processes. Alternative methods for conducting these assessments are proposed.

Accreditation

Accreditation is a public recognition that an institution of higher education has a sound financial basis, qualified instructors, bona fide programs of study, sufficient facilities and equipment, appropriate student service policies and procedures, and meets all of the claims that are made in their public relations materials (Distance Education and Training Council, 2000). All accredited institutions in the United States that are involved in distance learning initiatives need to be concerned about how their programs and courses will be viewed by accreditation organizations. Without accreditation by the appropriate agency, students will not have access to financial aid, the institution may not qualify for grants and there will be a halt to any government funding received. The public will question the value of the education being offered. The stakes are very high. Accreditation issues related to distance learning may become more complex as institutions offer programs outside of their home regions and find themselves subject to the requirements of more than one body. Most institutions rely upon one of the eight regional accreditation organizations for their accreditation status. When institutions join ranks and develop consortia to provide distance learning services, they may extend their geographic reach beyond the borders of one accreditation region and therefore face the requirements of more than that regional association. Since virtually all accreditors require evidence of regular assessment processes these requirements should be well thought out when distance learning is contemplated rather than after it has begun. Carnevale (2000) notes that the guidelines for evaluating distance education differ from the traditional educational standards by focusing on how much students learn.

A review of the policies of several major accreditation associations and professional groups, national, regional and specialized, yields similar results when issues of distance learning are concerned. The
Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (n.d.) indicates that, “Distance education is defined, for the purpose of accreditation review, as a formal educational process in which the majority of the instruction occurs when student and instructor are not in the same place. Instruction may be synchronous or asynchronous. Distance education may employ correspondence study, or audio, video, computer or other communications technologies.”

Of primary concern to all of the evaluative bodies is that the distance education initiative be consistent with the mission and purposes of the institution. Additionally, there should be evaluative mechanisms to ensure that programs and courses offered electronically have the same requirements and meet the same learning outcomes as traditionally offered courses. The level of congruence among the various learning environments should be so great as to allow students to move easily between the distance learning environment and the traditional campus environment. The regional accreditation processes actually minimize the differences between the two in standards and guidelines (Eaton, n.d.).

Faculty

Of the accreditation bodies reviewed, all recognized that the role of faculty is changed when viewed in the context of distance learning. Materials are created that may be reused with or without the individual’s knowledge or consent. The traditional concept of contact hours and scheduled classes is no longer relevant. For most faculty, distance learning requires significant training in technology and pedagogy beyond the area of their academic expertise (Commission on Higher Education, 1997). The training must be coupled with an ongoing program of support services specifically related to teaching using an electronic system. Supply of home-based hardware and software to enable instructor/student interaction to occur more frequently may be required.

Several bodies noted that the introduction of new modes of instructional delivery require a rethinking of issues of such as preparation time, teaching load, class size, and contact hours. Policies related to faculty evaluation may need reconsideration to include teaching and scholarship related to electronic initiatives (Commission on Institutions of Higher Education).

Library and Learning Resources

In general, the accreditation bodies studied sought programs that ensured that appropriate learning resources be available to students in distance learning programs. These resources, including library, media, tutoring and technical help lines, should not only be available, but students should be required to use them in their development of information literacy. The resources and requirements in distance learning should parallel the resources for traditional campus students.

Student Services

An effective distance-learning program is one that provides students with clear, complete, and timely
information on the curriculum, course and degree requirements, costs, and benefits the students may receive, such as job placement rates. Access to traditional services such as financial aid, academic advisement, placement and counseling should be available to the distance learning population (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 1999). Most accreditation organizations place the burden on the institution to assess whether the student has the background, knowledge and technical skills to succeed in the distance-learning environment (Commission on Higher Education, 1997).

Physical and Financial Resources

Emphasis in the area of physical and financial resources centers on the previous assumption that a distance learning program is part of an institution’s mission and therefore, the institution shares in the commitment to provide adequate funding to it. The institution must have both the equipment and technical expertise necessary to support a distance learning program. Students enrolled in distance learning programs must be given access to laboratories, libraries, facilities and equipment appropriate to their needs. There must be a commitment to continuing a distance learning alternative for a period of time sufficient for a student to complete a course or program. If a student begins a program with the understanding that a degree may be obtained solely in that environment, the program must be continued until that student has had the opportunity for completion, regardless of the financial implications.

Effectiveness and Outcomes

At the most basic level, institutions are required to provide for assessment and documentation of student achievement in each course and at the completion of a program. However, most accrediting bodies go beyond that in requiring that measures of educational effectiveness including assessments of student learning outcomes, student retention, and student and faculty satisfaction be collected (Carnevale, 2000). This information should be provided to students as well as within the institution (WICHE, 1999).

The Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (Commission on Higher Education, 1997) is very specific in requiring that:

…. In the development of appropriate formative and summative outcomes measures, institutions should articulate expected student knowledge, skill, and competency levels for distance learning courses and programs; specify the extent and content of student/faculty and student/student lectures, discussions, analyses and collaborations for the selected instructional delivery mode; specify comparative distance learning and traditional course data on student completion and retention rates, and student and faculty evaluations, using data from other programs or institutions; and specify comparative electronically offered and traditional course data on student grade distributions, awards and honors, graduation rates, and employment, utilizing data from other programs or institutions.
The commitment to distance learning by an institution goes well beyond the efforts of the participants to provide quality courses in a new environment. In order for these efforts to be accepted, providers must demonstrate their commitment to continuous improvement and excellence with concern for the same level of quality, integrity, and effectiveness that apply to campus-based instruction.

Assessment Methodologies

For many institutions, the movement to distance learning has been made without consideration of the assessment measures necessary to ascertain success or failure. Institutions utilize grades and survey instruments as the sole measures of program assessment in their assessment processes (Phipps and Merisotis; 1999; Creed, n.d.; Dominguez and Ridley, 1999). These measures are not adequate in the traditional campus setting and do not suffice in the distance learning environment. As educators, we need to measure the degree of our students’ learning to determine whether our programs are successful. In the campus-based classroom environment, we rely upon tests, papers, projects, and discussion. This becomes more difficult in the distance learning arena. We do not know so readily who is taking the on-line tests, where the term paper came from, and how participation in a discussion has translated into learning for the student. The removal of the face-to-face contact makes it harder for the instructor to evaluate which techniques are effective and which are not.

In an attempt to identify program assessment alternatives for faculty consideration, Woodley and Kirkwood (1998) have proposed a system of formative and summative evaluation. In the formative stage, critical review of the draft course materials by peers and developmental testing with students are recommended. Summative evaluation includes feedback from tutors and students. The authors recommend that student feedback include the extent of utilization of course materials, the development and administration of a survey instrument for various components of a course, and student interviews after the course, where possible.

In their proposal related to tools for assessment of distance education, Tarouco and Hack (n.d.) recommend the utilization of technologies that enable the instructor to track participation by individuals in the distance learning program. Student monitoring can occur throughout the educational process to determine what learning tools have been used by the student and with what frequency and duration. The use of bulletin boards, threaded discussions, chats, and links may be electronically monitored to audit the level of student involvement. The participatory responses of individuals may be viewed over time to allow the faculty member to determine student progress.

Dominguez and Ridley (1999) propose what is one of the more interesting approached in their case study at Christopher Newport University. In that paper, the authors describe an assessment methodology that includes a comparison of student performance in courses where the prerequisite course had been taken by some students via distance learning, and by others in the traditional classroom. In their study, they found no significant difference in student success rates in the subsequent campus-based course based on how the prerequisite course was taken. They concluded that the
online course provides the same level of preparation as the classroom-based course. As the authors note this approach is course-based rather than student-based as in the Woodley and Kirkwood (1998) and Tarouco and Hack (1999) models.

Summary

Institutions of higher education offering courses in various distance-learning modes are required by accreditation associations to view these offerings in a way that is unique to their status. The distance-learning environment must possess the same level of rigor and service as the campus-based environment and allow the student equivalent access to the advantages of the higher education community, albeit in a different way. Assessment techniques in distance learning that are required by the accreditation associations may take many forms. While most are student oriented, there are other alternatives. As institutions more fully develop distance-learning offerings, they need to retain their standards and learn different methods of assessment to verify that they have done so.

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