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Accreditation and quality in distance Education

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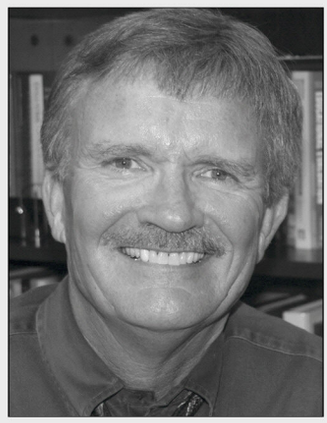
Accreditation and Quality in Distance Education

Michael Simonson

In March of 2006, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Postsecondary Education released an interesting report titled "Evidence of Quality in Distance Education Programs Drawn from Interviews with the Accreditation Community." What is interesting and important about this document is the approach used to collect information: 12 accrediting organizations were asked to identify representatives who had served on evaluation teams for schools offering distance education programs. These representatives were asked to identify "Good Practices and Red Flags." Their comments make great reading for anyone interested in identifying quality strategies for teaching and learning at a distance.



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The report is organized into six sections, each dealing with various indicators of quality. The six are Mission, Curriculum, Faculty, Students, Sustainability, and Evaluation and Assessment. In each category are dozens of indicators of quality and red flags—danger signs that often indicate a weak or ineffective distance education program.

Some of the most interesting positive indicators are:

- The mission statement contains an explicit statement of the purpose of distance education;
- The regular faculty have oversight of the distance education curriculum;
- The regular faculty are actively involved in course design;
- There is a strong and active faculty development process;
- The university provides instructional design support for distance education;

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- There is 24/7 technology support;
- There are academic advisers for distance education students;
- A systematic approach is applied to the growth and management of the distance education program;
- There are clear plans for the future of distance education;
- Evaluation of distance education courses and programs are used for continuous improvement; and
- Input from faculty and students is used for program improvement.

Of equal interest and importance are some of the most noteworthy "red flags."

- There are two separate approaches, even mission statements for traditional and distance education;
- There are two target populations for traditional and distance education;
- There are two course approval processes for traditional and distance education;
- Distance education courses are designed using a "cookie-cutter" approach;
- Faculty attempt or are encouraged to directly convert traditional courses to distance delivered courses;
- There are two course evaluation systems, one for traditional and one for distance education;
- Some student services must be accessed face-to-face by distant students;
- Distant students are often confused about contact people at the institution;
- The institution has a history of started and stopped distance education programs;
- Few, other than administrators, know about the institution's distance education program;
- There are a large number of distant students who drop out; and
- There are many complaints from distant students.

Obviously, it is important to read the report to clearly understand these two lists. The report also contains many other comments of the accrediting agency representatives. And, distance education can not be improved merely by using checklists. However, this report by the U.S. Department of Education is must reading for those dedicated to quality teaching and learning at a distance.

And finally, it is certainly a positive sign that so many organizations are offering suggestions, most based on research, not opinion, about improving quality in distance education—reports designed to produce quality without mandates, effectiveness without edicts, and performance without prescriptions.

REFERENCE

U. S. Department of Education. (2006). *Evidence of quality in distance education programs drawn from interviews with the accreditation community.* Retrieved April 30, 2007, from http://www.itcnetwork.org/Accreditation-EvidenceofQualityinDEPrograms.pdf

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