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ABSTRACT

In 1997-1998, there were more than 1.3 million enrollments in college-level, credit-granting distance education courses; this is approximately double the almost 754,000 formal enrollments in 1994-1995. The number of courses offered also almost doubled, with the nearly 26,000 distance education courses offered by 2- and 4-year higher education institutions in 1994-1995 growing to more than 47,500 different college-level courses in 1997-1998. This rapid growth in distance education has created the potential for fraud and abuse. With so many courses and programs offered by so many providers, how can students determine which courses and programs are worthwhile and which ones are shams? This digest reviews information about distance education, discusses accreditation, the traditional method of determining the quality of higher education offerings in the U.S., and how accreditation is being applied to distance education today. Although the past five years have seen much controversy, debate, and uncertainty, it appears that the accreditation community has begun to adapt, in large and small ways, accreditation practices and standards and apply them to distance education programs and institutions. (Contains 19 references.) (CS)

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DISTANCE EDUCATION AND ACCREDITATION

By Shannon Loane

Introduction

In 1997-1998, there were more than 1.3 million enrollments in college-level, credit-granting distance education courses – approximately double the almost 754,000 formal enrollments in 1994-1995 (Lewis, Snow, Farris, and Levin, 1999, p. 50). The number of courses offered also almost doubled, with the nearly 26,000 distance education courses offered by 2- and 4-year higher education institutions in 1994-1995 growing to more than 47,500 different college-level courses in 1997-1998 (Lewis, Snow, Farris, and Levin, 1999, p. 49).

This rapid growth in distance education has created the potential for fraud and abuse. With so many courses and programs offered by so many providers, how can students determine which courses and programs are worthwhile – and which ones are shams? This digest will, after reviewing some information on distance education, discuss accreditation, the traditional method of determining the quality of higher education offerings in the United States, and its application to distance education.

Distance Education

Distance education, sometimes known as distance learning, is “the process whereby the education of a student occurs in circumstances where the educator and the student are geographically separated, and the communication across this distance is accomplished by one or more forms of technology” (American Association of University Professors, May-June 1998, p. 32). It is not a new concept – distance education was initially offered through print-based correspondence courses, then through telecourses and videotapes, and now through computer-based instruction (although print and video are still used).

The current explosion in distance education is attributable to the development and spread of new technologies. In 1997-1998, the most popular technology for offering distance education courses was Internet courses using asynchronous computer-based instruction. Sixty percent of higher education institutions offering distance education courses used this technology, up from 22 percent in 1995. Other popular technologies included two-way interactive video (56 percent), one-way prerecorded video (48 percent), Internet courses using synchronous computer-based instruction (19 percent), and one-way video with two-way audio (14 percent) (Lewis, Snow, Farris, and Levin, 1999, p. 52).

There are other variables in distance education. Students can do anything from taking a single course, which may or may not require occasional meetings on campus, to completing an entire degree or program online. Distance education courses or programs may be offered by traditional bricks-and-mortar universities or colleges, by “virtual” institutions whose entire offerings are online, by online consortia, or by for-profit institutions.

Its supporters claim that distance education is more convenient and accessible for nontraditional students – an increasingly large percentage of the higher education population (American Association of University Professors, May-June 1998, p. 31; Trinkle, 1999, August 6). Distance education allows these students to pursue an education in addition to fulfilling their commitments to jobs and families. It also provides accessibility for those not located near a traditional college or university. Supporters also point to cost savings – with virtual courses, educational institutions can accommodate greater numbers of students without incurring the costs of new buildings and classrooms (Dasher-Alton, Patton, 1998, p. 13).

Critics of distance education, however, question whether there are genuine cost savings, after taking into account the investment in infrastructure, the work involved in adapting or creating a course for delivery through computer-based instruction, and the need to provide distance education students with basic university functions, such as registration, advising, and access to library materials (American Association of University Professors, May-June 1998, pp. 32-33).

They also question the quality of the online educational experience, and point to the increasing publicity about online “diploma mills” as an example of what happens when students cannot see what they are paying for. “Diploma mills” are fraudulent institutions that offer worthless degrees, many requiring little or no coursework, in exchange for money. Such institutions have existed in the past, but the Internet offers them the ability not only to reach many more potential students, but also to attract these students through enticing and misleading websites.

Accreditation

The American higher education system has faced the dilemma of ascertaining quality before – with traditional colleges and universities. The solution then was accreditation, a voluntary non-governmental system of

quality assurance. Most countries have a “Ministry of Education,” or its equivalent, that exercises control over the quality of educational institutions, but the U.S. Department of Education has no such role. Instead, the Department of Education, as required by law, publishes a list of “nationally recognized accrediting agencies that the Secretary determines to be reliable authorities as to the quality of education or training provided by the institutions of higher education and the higher education programs they accredit” (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education. *Overview of Accreditation*). An accredited institution undergoes periodic self-studies, inspections, and evaluations to certify that it meets the standards of the accrediting body in areas as diverse as governance, curriculum, faculty, finances, and student services (Wellman, 2000, September 22).

The Department of Education lists the following as some of the functions of accreditation:

1. Verifying that an institution or program meets established standards;
2. Assisting prospective students in identifying acceptable institutions;
3. Assisting institutions in determining the acceptability of transfer credits;
4. Helping to identify institutions and programs for the investment of public and private funds;
5. Protecting an institution against harmful internal and external pressure;
6. Creating goals for self-improvement of weaker programs and stimulating a general raising of standards among educational institutions;
7. Involving the faculty and staff comprehensively in institutional evaluation and planning;
8. Establishing criteria for professional certification and licensure and for upgrading courses offering such preparation; and
9. Providing one of several considerations used as a basis for determining eligibility for Federal assistance.

(U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education.

Accreditation in the U.S.)

The nationally recognized accrediting agencies offer three basic types of accreditation: regional, national, and specialized.

Regional: The six regional accrediting agencies evaluate entire institutions, not the individual programs within them. An institution with regional accreditation has satisfied the agency that it meets the accreditation standards as a whole, and that each of its programs, while not necessarily all of the same quality, contributes to the institution’s standing. All state universities, most private colleges, and most private research institutions, are regionally accredited (Lezberg, Summer 1999) diverse programs. Examples of the types of institutions that might have national accreditation are Bible colleges and other theological schools or distance education.

National: National accreditation also focuses on the entire institution, but usually on institutions with a very narrow focus, not universities or colleges with many institutions.

Specialized: Specialized accreditors evaluate individual programs, usually within an institution (that institution probably holds regional or national accreditation as a whole). These programs are often those leading to a professional degree. Programs in law, medicine, and business are among those that have specialized accreditation.

The Challenges Distance Education Poses for Accreditation

Distance education challenges accreditation in a number of ways:

- Many of the measures used in traditional accreditation reviews do not apply to online institutions – among these are the institution’s full-time faculty, the number of volumes in the research library, and the amount of time that students are in class (Wellman, 2000, September 22).
- How can it be determined if a course offered online is equivalent to a traditional classroom based course?
- Who will accredit a university that does not have a physical campus? Regional accreditation, as its name suggests, is based on the physical location of the institution. Western Governors University, a collaboration of 18 states and Guam, has its administrative headquarters in Utah (located within the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges accreditation region) and its academic headquarters in Colorado (located within the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools accreditation



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region).

▪ Even for those institutions that do have a physical campus, what happens when the student is in another region and never sets foot on the physical campus?

Educators are divided on these and other questions. Some educators believe that current accreditation standards, with some changes, are flexible enough to accommodate distance education programs (Olsen, 1999, August 6). Others believe that distance education means major changes, and possibly a challenge to the very idea of accreditation (Wellman, 2000, September 22; Carnevale, 2000, February 18).

Current Status of Distance Education and Accreditation

A number of efforts are underway as the higher education community attempts to resolve the issue of accreditation of distance education courses and programs.

The Department of Education has determined that distance education "is considered to be implicitly included in the scope of recognition of any accrediting agency that was recognized by the Secretary on or before October 1, 1998, provided the agency was engaged in accrediting review activities related to distance education at that time. Since December 1999, the Department has been routinely including distance education in its in-depth review of all agencies seeking initial or continued recognition. Consequently, all recognition decisions made after December 1, 1999 include a determination as to whether or not an agency's scope of recognition includes the accreditation of distance education" (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education. *Nationally Recognized Accreditation Agencies*).

In addition, the Department of Education has granted the Accrediting Commission of the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC) the authority to accredit "private and non-private distance education institutions offering non-degree and associate, baccalaureate, and master's degree programs primarily through the distance learning method" (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education. *National Institutional and Specialized Accrediting Bodies - Distance Education and Training Council*).

The regional accrediting agencies joined together in the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions to work for consistency across regions in distance education accreditation. Two documents developed by the Council, *Statement of Commitment by the Regional Accrediting Commissions for the Evaluation of Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs* and *Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs*, are under consideration by the individual agencies (Carnevale, 2000, September 8; Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications. *Regional Accrediting Agency Documents on Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs*).

The North Central Association of Colleges and Schools has been one of the more active regional accrediting agencies in the area of distance education institutions. In 1999, it accredited Jones International University, the first completely virtual university to win accreditation status from a regional accrediting agency (Olsen, 1999, August 6). North Central has also granted DeVry Institutes accreditation for its online bachelor's degree programs (Blumenstyk, 2000, September 8). And, along with three other regional accrediting agencies, North Central has formed the Inter-Regional Accrediting Committee (IRAC) to create and implement an accreditation plan for Western Governors University (WGU) (Guernsey, 1997, December 19). WGU, which has already been accredited by DETC, received "Candidate for Accreditation" status from IRAC in November 2000 (Western Governors University. *About WGU*).

How to Determine if a Distance Education Program is Accredited

To determine if a distance education program or course is accredited, first check with the institution to see which agency has granted the institution accreditation. Remember, however, that some institutions may claim accreditation from non-existent agencies with plausible-sounding names, or from accreditation agencies they themselves have established, but which have no standing with the Department of Education.

Confirm any information received about an institution's accreditation with the Department of Education and the accrediting agency in question. Department of Education-recognized accrediting agencies are listed on the Department of Education website at <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OPE/accreditation/natl agencies.html>. From this site, one may link to the accrediting agency's website and determine whether a particular institution is on its list of accredited institutions.

Conclusion

As the world of distance education expands and changes, the need to ensure that courses and programs offered through distance education meet minimum standards of quality has become more important than ever. The traditional method of determining that higher education institutions in the United States

meet these minimum standards has been through accreditation by agencies recognized by the Department of Education. Although the past five years have seen much controversy, debate, and uncertainty, it appears that the accreditation community has begun to adapt – in large and small ways – accreditation practices and standards and apply them to distance education programs and institutions.

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