

Theory-to-Practice

The Evolution of Standards for Distance Learning in Higher Education: Back to the Future

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Abstract

Since the advent of correspondence instruction in the early 20th century, issues of quality in collegiate distance education have been a perennial concern both to practitioners in the field and other education professionals. Over the past two or three decades, as advances in technology made their way into the education arena, the format formerly labeled “independent study” linked with the new technologies and became “distance education.” As distance learning pedagogies made their way into the mainstream of higher education, the importance of guidelines or standards for the format have taken on added significance, especially as they relate to issues of accreditation. How these standards evolved and proliferated over the last few decades and how they link to the criteria and Standards of the Division of Independent Study of the National University Continuing Education Association (1989) is clearly evident when comparing the former to several more recent sets of distance learning guidelines. Although standards are of critical importance to the field of distance education, simply providing them does not ensure quality in every educational encounter between a teacher and students meeting in cyberspace any more than they do for a teacher and students meeting in a traditional classroom. However, the development of and adherence to standards has significant implications for higher education in the future.

Issues of Quality in Distance Learning

In a paper delivered at the 3rd Distance Education Symposium held at The Pennsylvania State University in 1995, Dr. Von Pittman, then Associate Dean of University Credit Programs at the University of Iowa, mentioned that the number one “enduring” issue for collegiate indepen-

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dent study programs was credit restrictions (Pittman, 1995, p. 27). This concern arose from the perception that if a student was not sitting in front of a professor in a classroom in real time, that somehow, his instruction lacked the quality of his counterpart who was learning in a classroom. This mindset also resulted in the limit placed on the number of hours earned through independent study that a student could apply toward a college degree in many, if not most, institutions of higher learning prior to that decade.

In discussing regional accreditation issues and their relationship to perceptions concerning quality, Pittman stated:

As other distance education formats have begun to realize their potential, the question of academic integrity has become a much larger topic. Various bodies outside of universities have involved themselves in policy making. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, for example, now has guidelines for distance education and other regional associations are beginning to demonstrate an interest. (1995, p. 27)

That same year Steven Crow, Deputy Director of the North Central Association's Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, in an article on distance learning and the challenges it poses for institutional accreditation said, "The basic operating assumption [in developing standards for distance learning] will be that the distance education enterprise takes place within a recognizable institutional context and that the quality of education provided at the sponsoring institution serves as the measure for the quality of education to be provided through distance delivery" (Crow, 1995, p. 355). Undoubtedly, at that moment in history, the quality of college courses and programs offered at a distance was (and still is to some extent) in question.

Accreditation and Distance Learning Standards

During the decade that followed, all of the country's collegiate regional accrediting associations collaboratively adopted specific guidelines for offering courses, programs, degrees, and certificates through various distance delivery formats. Thus, it appears that agencies outside of the discipline forced distance education professionals to take a serious look at how they were doing things. One need only review the current-day lists of standards that the accrediting bodies, university-sponsored

distance-delivery proponents, and the numerous organizations devoted to enhancing distance-delivery systems have devised, to recognize the similarities in their efforts to regulate the field.

Accreditation issues, quality control, and standards appear to be, in some sense, inexorably connected. In a 2003 article, Linda Bruce, an instructional designer with the Johns Hopkins' Bloomberg School of Public Health, commenting on the purpose of standards [in collegiate distance education] confirms that view. "Typically, the primary purpose of standards is to improve the teaching and learning process," she says. "But standards can have an impact on multiple, related issues like teacher certification, consortia initiatives, competition for distance students, eligibility for funding, and accreditation." (Bruce, 2003, p.1). Citing the introduction to The Distance Education and Online Learning Act of 2003, she further comments: "We can see from this legislative development and many other developments in the arena of distance education the widening influence of standards of excellence" (Bruce, 2003, p. 1).

Distance Learning Standards and Their Evolution

Prior to 1995, with the exception of Standards of the Division of Independent Study (1989) of the National University Continuing Education Association, few published guidelines specifically targeted to distance-delivery formats were available. However, over the past decade, spurred on by the vigilance of the accrediting bodies and an abundance of research on the subject, the development of standards for collegiate distance education programs came into vogue. Examples of such guidelines include Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Academic Degree and Certificate Programs (Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications, 1995), Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs (The Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, 1999) (which all regional accrediting bodies eventually approved for use in accrediting collegiate distance education programs), Standards for Academic and Student Support Services in Distance Education Credit Courses, Degree and Certificate Programs (Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System, 2000), and Principles of Good Practice for Distance Learning/Web-Based Courses (Missouri Department of Higher Education, 2003).

Standards of the Division of Independent Study (1989) of the National University Continuing Education Association had its origins in a

set of guidelines developed by the Correspondence Study Division of the National University Education Association in the mid-1960s. Long before the term “distance education” became popular, this group explored methods of regulating quality in the correspondence study materials produced by its member institutions. Under the guidance and direction of two pioneer educators in the field, Charles Wedemeyer and Gail B. Childs, and with the publication of a landmark study in the field, *Correspondence Instruction in the United States* (MacKenzie, Christensen & Rigby, 1968), correspondence instruction (in the mid-1970s, correspondence instruction was generally referred to as “independent study”) took on a new professionalism that would permeate the field even into the current era where it is now one of many educational pedagogies labeled “distance education.”

In reviewing the most recent version of the Division of Independent Study’s Standards (1989), it is interesting to note its currency in terms of modern-day collegiate distance learning practice. Each of its components closely resembles those of the other more recent collections of distance education “guidelines” reviewed. In varying degrees, they include:

1. Philosophy and mission
2. Institutional administrative support
3. Faculty support
4. Instruction
5. Student services
6. Evaluation and assessment

Division of Independent Study (NUCEA): Back to the Future

The specific components of Standards of the Division of Independent Study (1989) of the National University and Continuing Education Association are particularly contemporary in tone. Under the section entitled, “Philosophy,” the “importance of providing educational opportunities for all persons regardless of age, financial status, geographical location, health, previous educational accomplishments, race, sex, and other differences,” (National University and Continuing Education Association, 1989, I. A) is stressed and is apropos in light of today’s emphasis on the individual student. Under “Mission,” the Association stated that, “the independent study program should be conducted in accordance with a basic mission statement which is periodically reviewed and consistent with the mission of the institution,” (II. A) of which, it is a part. Further, the Standards state that the administration of such a program

should be delegated to a director “who is given [the] responsibility of defining procedures and [has] sufficient authority to carry them out effectively” (III. A). In addition, the document suggests that “the independent study director should be responsible for assuring that institutional academic standards and credit procedures are upheld in accordance with well defined and publicized policy” (III.C). Regarding faculty teaching in such programs, the emphasis is placed on the importance of “positive institutional recognition (support) of [their] participation in independent study activities” (V.D). The Association further supports the premise that “the quality of Instruction should be fully consistent with that maintained in the Institution” (VI.B). Furthermore, the Association “considers that the content of a college independent study course offered for academic credit be comparable in scope and depth to that of the equivalent course taught in residence” (V.B). Regarding student services, the document states that they should include “information concerning library and other resources, special resources (kits, books, etc.) from the independent study department when necessary, counseling and advisement, flexible scheduling of examinations, and special arrangements to meet unusual individual needs whenever possible” (VII, 1-5). Finally, the standards document concludes that the independent study unit should “conduct ongoing research that evaluates [assesses] and improves its programs.” (VIII. A).

The progression of “correspondence study” to “independent study” in higher education helped to formalize the term “distance education,” earning it some degree of respectability. This recognition on the part of educators prompted the U.S. Department of Education’s Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education to sponsor a project of the Western Interstate Cooperative for Higher Education (WICHE) appropriately named “Balancing Quality and Access: Reducing State Policy Barriers to Electronically Delivered Higher Education Programs.” This project resulted in the creation of the Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Academic Degree & Certificate Programs (WICHE, 1995) which sought to ensure excellence in electronic course delivery and, ultimately, gave birth in 1998 to Western Governors University, a consortium of 16 western-state universities, colleges, and community colleges that banded together to offer degrees through various forms of distance education. A listing of the major components of the document clearly indicates the similarities between it and NUCEA’s revised Standards of the Division of Independent Study (1989). As to role and mission, the WICHE principles insist that developers of such programs ensure

that they be “consistent with the institution’s role and mission” (p. 2). Turning to faculty support, institutions are urged to “provide faculty support services specifically related to teaching via an electronic system” (p. 2.). Regarding students and student services, the principles suggest that “enrolled students have reasonable and adequate access to the range of student services appropriate to support their learning” (p.3). Finally, looking at evaluation and assessment, the document states that “The institution evaluates the program’s educational effectiveness, including assessments of student learning outcomes...” (p. 3).

Following suit in 1997, the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools issued its own set of Guidelines for Distance Education. Along with the WICHE document (to which it is very similar), it would serve as the underpinning for the development of a more extensive set of standards for regionally-accredited institutions of higher learning seeking accreditation for electronically-delivered college course/program offerings. While maintaining the same components, this document essentially expands the list breaking it down into sub-units beginning with:

... a general statement followed by individual numbered paragraphs addressing specific matters describing those elements essential to quality distance education programming. These in turn are followed by protocols in the form of questions designed to assist in determining the existence of those elements [needed] when reviewing, either internally or externally, distance education activities. (The Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, 1999, p. 2)

These more specific recommendations, designed to ensure quality in the delivery of distance education programs at those institutions applying them to their distance-delivery efforts, would result in their achieving or retaining regional accreditation. For over a decade, these guidelines have been used in this manner and will, in all probability, continue to be used well into the future.

Following the move of the accrediting bodies to develop guidelines for electronic course delivery, many colleges and universities began to develop similar guidelines geared specifically for internal use.

Early in 2000, the Regents of the University of Wisconsin System organized a task force of University personnel and students to create a document entitled Standards for Academic and Student Support Services in Distance Education Credit Courses, Degree and Certificate Programs. These standards closely mimic the North Central Association’s Guide-

lines (1997) document. Supplemental guidelines for programs to be developed and approved within the University of Wisconsin System soon followed. The broader Wisconsin document defined distance education as any “teaching/learning experience in which teacher and students are separated by physical distance and where course materials may be delivered in an asynchronous or synchronous mode over a wide spectrum of existing and evolving media” (p. X). Included in the document are the standard elements noted in most of the prior sets of guidelines such as the institution’s “assuming responsibility for . . . and oversight of distance education, ensuring both the rigor of programs and the quality of instruction. In addition they include: student access to libraries and other institutional services, and evaluating [assessing] the educational effectiveness of its distance education programs” (p. X).

In that same year, the Missouri Department of Higher Education in conjunction with the Coordinating Board for Higher Education, released its own set of standards entitled Principles of Good Practice for Distance Learning/Web-Based Courses. Based closely on the 1999 version of the North Central Association’s Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs, the introduction to these principles urges their adherents “to . . . encourage reflection on quality and best practices as faculty and institutions negotiate the rapidly changing and sometimes unfamiliar territory that such courses inherently have . . . and to operationalize these principles in locally-directed ways that result in meaningful steps toward ensuring high quality” (Missouri Department of Higher Education, 2003, p.1). The major components in this document are essentially the same as those previously mentioned. They include distance learning courses and programs that maintain high “academic integrity,” are “assessed and evaluated regularly,” and that “ensure students access to adequate resources and services” (p. 2).

Conclusion: Standards and the Bottom Line

Currently, administrators, teachers, researchers, and other interested parties may now access an array of standards aimed at distance-delivery modes and their influence on and support of quality educational experiences for those college students who, for whatever reasons, choose to learn outside of the confines of the traditional classroom.

The use of standards in determining outcomes in distance learning courses and programs in higher education has several implications as we move into the next decade. Traditional education advocates should view

distance learning options more favorably if standards are rigorously adhered to in evaluating the effectiveness of distance learning courses. As more and more institutions of higher learning move toward including distance learning courses and degree programs at their institutions, many are experimenting with blended methods, offering a combination of classroom instruction in real time, along with both synchronous and asynchronous distance learning activities. And, as mentioned earlier, issues of accreditation, teacher certification, and funding are simplified when a codified set of standards can be applied to distance education courses, programs, and degrees. Finally, the bottom line is the flexibility that distance learning allows students who cannot or do not choose to earn a degree on campus. The lifestyles of today's college students are becoming increasingly busy and fragmented. No doubt, the lifestyles of future generations of students will follow suit. Thus, distance learning options will, more than likely, become more commonplace.

Finally, it must be noted that standards are undoubtedly important but do not, in and of themselves, guarantee a quality learning experience for students any more than those imposed in the traditional classroom. In an article on e-learning in the U.S., Paul Edelson and Von Pittman (2001) conclude that:

Distance learning can provide an educational environment every bit as demanding

as the traditional face-to-face class. Quality resides in the worth of the effort put forth by faculty and students. There are—and always have been—poor face-to-face classes, just as there are—and long have been—inferior distance learning classes. Discussions of quality and its pursuit must be waged on an individual basis, class-by-class. (p. 132-133).

Emphasizing this fact, Thomas L. Russell (1999), in his landmark publication on classroom instruction versus distance education, suggests that if all systems are in place there is no significant difference in subject matter mastery between a student who learns in a classroom taught by a live teacher and one who learns sitting at a computer assisted by a teacher several thousand miles away. In the world of distance learning, as in the classroom, it is “quality” that counts. Standards are simply a way of ensuring that quality supersedes any emphasis on the delivery mode (Russell, 1999).

What most current distance education standards or guidelines have in common is that they are not far removed from those developed and utilized by institutions of higher learning that offering courses at a distance long before the term “distance education” came into vogue. These

pioneers in the field struggled to deal not only with the realities of working outside the mainstream of academia, but also with the awesome burden of determining how they could best serve an often underserved and undervalued student population. Today that population is part of the mainstream. Thanks to past leaders in the distance learning movement, whose courageous efforts established a set of specific standards for “good practice” in teaching at a distance, today’s students are reaping the benefits.

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