EVIDENCE OF QUALITY IN DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAMS DRAWN FROM INTERVIEWS WITH THE ACCREDITATION COMMUNITY

U.S. Department of Education

Office of Postsecondary Education

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Introduction

- This report is in response to the GAO Report to Congressional Requesters on Distance Education (GAO-04-279).

- The GAO recommended that the Secretary of Education "(1) develop, with the help of accrediting agencies and schools, guidelines or a mutual understanding that would lead to more consistent and thorough assessment of distance education programs, including developing evaluative components for holding schools accountable for such outcomes and (2) if necessary, request authority from the Congress to require that accrediting agencies use these guidelines in their accreditation efforts."

Introduction

- Department staff identified twelve accrediting organizations whose scope of recognition as determined by the Secretary of Education includes the evaluation of distance education and invited staff from these organizations to participate in one of two discussion sessions.

Introduction

- The discussions with the nineteen evaluators from the accrediting organizations that have distance education included in their scope of recognition yielded a great deal of specific information about **the kind of evidence they consider to be indicative of quality in distance education**, and **also indicators of possible problems** with the way the institution or program is approaching distance education.

Mission

- Evaluators were clear about the importance of ensuring that distance education is appropriate to the mission of the institution under review.

- For an institution with significant numbers of distance education programs, the reviewer would expect the institutional mission statement to be explicit about increasing access, or reaching out to underserved or special populations (such as working adults).

- Most reviewers see distance education programs as serving students who need flexibility in terms of time and location.

Mission

- A key factor to examine is what populations are being served.
- Distance education is obviously a good fit for working students and for those whose schedules involve frequent travel.
- The mission or purpose should reflect the reason for distance education.

Mission – Red Flags

- Senior administrators are not able to articulate the strategic importance of distance education and its role in the broader mission of the institution.
- A review of course and program offerings reveals a shift in the balance between face-to-face and distance education, when the two formats serve significantly different student populations.
- This may be evidence of an institution drifting from its mission, unless it is part of the institution's strategic plan. Alternatively, it could signal the need for a revised mission.
- Program documents, faculty, or staff identify target populations for distance education offerings that are significantly different from the populations the institution has served in the past, such as international students.

Curriculum and Instruction

- Reviewers for regional accreditation agencies look for evidence that faculty who are involved in governance have oversight of the curriculum.

- A good practice is to examine the documentation of the program planning and evaluation process or to interview the faculty leadership about the process.

- The reviewers then confirm that the processes are followed by looking for additional evidence such as minutes from faculty meetings, interviews with individual faculty about their involvement in planning and decision-making, and written assessments of curricular materials.

- In situations where outside experts are used to build courses, the reviewers ensure that faculty have defined course scope and objectives and that faculty review the courses after they have been developed.

Curriculum and Instruction

- The development of a coherent curriculum, rather than a collection of courses, requires a systematic and coordinated approach to planning.

- A good practice for evaluators of distance education programs is to look for:

  - a logically sequenced course development schedule that will ensure the availability of courses as students need them;

  - faculty training sessions that are aligned with the development schedule;

  - the use of a common platform (for online courses);

  - some consistency in course formats; and

  - a schedule of course offerings for the next few years to assist students in planning.

Curriculum and Instruction

- Curricula that include laboratories, hands-on learning components and practicums pose challenges when they are adapted for distance education delivery.

- A reviewer expects the curriculum planning documents to specifically address how these components will be provided and what kind of processes are in place to ensure adequate oversight by qualified personnel.

- If an institution contracts with others (some examples include another educational institution, a clinic, or a private technical training company) to provide any of these resources, evaluators expect to see provisions in the written agreement addressing elements that are key to ensuring the experience will support the learning outcomes.

Curriculum Evaluation

The review of distance education curricula also includes an appraisal of actual courses.

A good practice is to review a sample of syllabi to see whether course descriptions and learning objectives are clearly stated and whether the assignments and other assessment strategies are mapped, or connected to, the learning objectives.

If the courses are offered in both face-to-face and in distance education modes, reviewers look for comparable or equivalent learning objectives.

Structure of Course is Important

The structure of the course is also a critical element. Courses that are designed with benchmarks and clear deadlines or recommended schedules provide evidence that the institution is aware of some of the time management challenges, and risk of attrition, of distance learning students, who are typically juggling a variety of roles including work, family and study.

Encouraging Interaction in Courses

- A close examination of the course syllabus is a strategy for reviewers to assess the degree of importance of interaction between faculty and student and among students.

- Some evidence might include requirements for students to:
  participate in discussions, evaluate drafts of other students' work, and work in small groups on projects.

- Other evidence would be the inclusion in the grading rubrics of "quality of participation" in discussions and group work.

Course Layout

Use of the same interface (in online courses) or layout (in print-based courses) lessens confusion for students and is an indicator of good course design and institutional oversight.

In print-based courses, "layout" would encompass the

course overview and course objectives, unit objectives, narrative discussion, learning activities, and review questions.

For online courses, the use of the same

course management system will result in a common interface and basic course

structure.

Evaluation of Instruction in Online Courses

- Request access to several courses in addition

to those the institution initially provides in order to avoid seeing only those that are considered exemplary.

- A review of a variety of courses allows the evaluator to determine whether there is some consistency in quality as evidenced by course design, basic pedagogical approach, use of tools, and level and types of interaction among students and between students and faculty.

Faculty Participation

- Examine the extent to which faculty add value beyond what a student would read in a textbook.

- For example, the faculty member might provide additional information or resources to assist students in understanding difficult concepts; pose questions and facilitate and summarize group discussions; be available to answer individual questions about course material and assignments; and give detailed feedback on assignments.

Curriculum – Red Flags

- Procedures for approval of distance education curricula differ from those for traditionally-delivered curricula.

- For example, the distance education curricula are not reviewed by the faculty curriculum committee.

- The curriculum plan indicates that a large number of students are expected to enroll in each section of an online course. This could compromise the effectiveness of interaction between the students and faculty unless additional provision is made to accommodate large numbers.

Curriculum – Red Flags

- The curriculum design does not take into consideration the target population. For example, an online curriculum designed for shift workers includes courses that require students to participate in synchronous activities (such as online chat sessions) at a specified time. This could conflict with some of the students' work

  (or sleep) schedules.

- The use of only a single method of assessment in a course might indicate that the course does not adequately link assessments and outcomes.

- Students express dissatisfaction with the quality of their distance education courses.

- Courses lack objectives.

Curriculum – Red Flags

- Courses are all very much alike, indicating a "cookie-cutter" approach to course development. While the use of the same platform will provide some consistency in online courses, a reviewer expects courses to make use of different instructional strategies and tools to fulfill their individual objectives.

- The discussion board in an online course shows little or no activity.

- The majority of student postings lack substance and show little evidence of reflection or critical thinking.

- There is rapid turnover in adjunct faculty assigned to teach courses.

- Course materials have not been updated in over five years. For certain curricula, the updating should be done more frequently.

Faculty Support

- Reviewers were united in their conviction that an institution needs to approach distance education in a systemic manner, which includes providing a range of faculty support services.

- Faculty development is a critical component for ensuring quality in distance education.

Faculty Support

- Ask about the extent and frequency of the training that is provided. Good training is broader than software training. It addresses distance education pedagogy, with specific emphasis on instructional strategies to foster interaction, to convey concepts, and to assess student learning.

- It also provides guidance to a faculty member on how to translate an onsite course to the distance delivery mode being used in order to achieve specific learning outcomes.

- It should be clear what organizational unit is responsible for providing the training and on-going support for faculty.

Faculty Support

- Providing faculty access to specialized resources and technical support for course development and delivery is also a sign of a quality distance education initiative.

- Ask about what resources faculty are given and their satisfaction with the support the institution provides.

- Positive indicators include the availability of someone with instructional design skills during course development and of personnel who are able to resolve technical problems that arise during delivery.

Use of Adjunct Faculty

- In order to achieve some consistency in the quality, adjunct faculty should have training and support comparable to that provided the regular faculty.

- Additionally, adjunct faculty need to be integrated into the culture of the institution.

- It is a good practice for reviewers to interview some adjunct faculty members to determine the kind of training and support they receive and their sense of engagement with the institution.

- Additional evidence of adjunct faculty integration includes their participation in faculty meetings, service on faculty committees, involvement in discussion forums, and selection as mentors to new faculty.

Faculty Support – Red Flags

- Comments from faculty indicate that they have directly translated their traditional course to a distance education course. This may indicate inadequate consideration of distance education pedagogy.

- Faculty are given primary responsibility for resolving technical issues for students or are required to produce their own courses (upload materials, find or design graphics, etc). This may indicate that the support structure for distance education is lacking.

- A number of faculty engage in distance education course development and delivery, while carrying a full-time teaching load. This may be a sign that the institution is not building the appropriate systems to sustain a growing distance education initiative.

- Student evaluations of sections of courses taught by adjunct and regular faculty show wide variation between the two.

Student and Academic Services

- Institutions offering full programs via distance education need to provide the full range of services at times and in ways that are convenient for these students.

- These services include admissions and registration, enrollment advising, academic advising, financial aid, career counseling, library resources, textbook ordering, technical assistance, and veterans and disability assistance.

Student and Academic Services

- To be successful, students who are admitted to distance education programs need to have the appropriate equipment and personal characteristics, such as being self-directed and having good time management skills. A good practice is for evaluators to review the kinds of information and resources an institution provides prospective students.

Good Practices – Pre-Admission Services

Providing prospective distance education students with a self-assessment of their skills and aptitude for distance learning is good evidence that the institution is attempting to enroll students with the appropriate characteristics in their distance education programs.

A distance education orientation program, or primer, can give prospective students an idea of how they will fare in a distance education course.

A website that serves prospective distance education students would include a thorough description of how the courses will be offered, how students will get textbooks and other materials, the kinds of equipment needed (which may include an online equipment check), any requirements for on-campus work, and a way to contact an advisor.

- Distance education students should not experience significant delays in getting the resources they need to be successful academically.

- Reviewers look for policies and practices that indicate a commitment to providing distance learning students with timely and accessible services and information.

Sufficient Technology Support Services

- Ideally available 24/7 or a variety of different hours
- Policies regarding support response times
- Data that shows the policy is followed
- Provision for dealing with an emergency situation
- Faculty response times are defined by policy and followed
- There is a provision for students to be able to contact academic advisor

Library Services

- Information is available and accessible
- Training is provided regarding how to use resources
- Students have access to a librarian by phone, fax, email and/or online chat to request assistance or services.
- Evidence that students use the services

Student and Academic Services – Red Flags

- An institution that offers full programs by distance education, with no onsite components, requires students to come to campus for some student services.

- The distance education office is responsible for providing all services to students, rather than having services provided by specialized staff. This could indicate a lack of institutional commitment to distance education students.

- The student grievance process requires face-to-face meetings.

- Students don't know whom to contact if they have questions or problems.

Planning for Sustainability and Growth

- Institutions need to be strategic about growing their distance education programs to ensure adequate resources to serve growing numbers of students.

- Chief among these resources are qualified and trained faculty to staff additional sections of courses; sufficient capacity in student and academic services and personnel; a robust, scalable technical infrastructure; and funds for course development and marketing of new programs.

Evidence of Strategic Planning for Growth of Distance Programs

- The institution's intent to increase the number of distance education programs and students is explicitly stated in planning documents and by institutional leaders.

- The strategic plan includes specific growth targets with budgets to support the additional services. In addition, the plan includes some justification for the enrollment projections, such as marketing surveys, and contingency plans in the event that the targets are not met.

- There is a five-year technology plan

- There is a strategy for identifying, hiring and training faculty needed for new
- programs

- The revenue derived from distance education programs is invested to sustain and strengthen the institution's capacity to provide quality distance education

Planning for Sustainability and Growth – Red Flags

The distance education administrators are the only staff who discuss plans for distance education. Indicating lack of institutional commitment.

Interviews with faculty and staff reveal that growth in enrollments exceeds the institution's capacity to provide appropriate academic and student support services.

There are no internal agreements about how distance education programs will be supported in institutions for which distance education is limited to one or two departments.

New programs are launched on the basis of perceived need, but without any research indicating there is a market for them.

Evaluation and Assessment

- Evidence of educational effectiveness at institutions offering distance education programs differs little from the evidence reviewers look for at institutions offering no distance education.

- Essentially, reviewers want to know how the institution measures student learning, how it assesses the experiences that lead to those outcomes, and what changes it makes based on the assessments.

Reviewers frequently cited the importance of adequate feedback loops in the areas that are closely associated with quality in higher education – student and academic services, faculty development, and course development and delivery.

Evaluation

- At the course level, it is a good practice for reviewers to look at course evaluations, and to interview faculty about how they have used the course evaluations to improve their courses and about how these changes have affected student performance and outcomes.

- Course evaluations can also yield important information for improving faculty training and development. Reviewers ask those who design the training whether and how it has changed in response to course evaluations and other assessment information.

- In institutions where courses are developed centrally and individual sections are taught by faculty (including adjunct faculty) who were not involved in the original development, it is a good practice for reviewers to confirm that there is a mechanism in place to get information from the instructional faculty on how the courses can be improved, and that this is reflected in course revisions.

- Positive evidence that can be derived from faculty interviews includes information about how their onsite teaching has improved as a result of their distance education experience, accompanied by specific examples illustrating a positive impact on student performance.

Evaluation – student performance

- In terms of student performance, reviewers look for evidence that there is some response if students don't perform as required, such as referral to an academic advisor or tutor, or to some other resource.

- It is a positive indicator if an institution identifies struggling students who are enrolled in their first one or two distance education courses and provides them with the support they need to succeed in this environment, or to pursue a more traditional educational path.

- Reviewers query administrators about what processes are in place to document weaknesses in services to students, and ask for examples of ways the services have been improved as a result of the assessment. The ability to adapt and make change quickly is a strong indicator that the institution or program is student centered.

Assessment Program Outcomes

- Reviewers who were interviewed generally considered it appropriate to compare outcomes for programs offered both by distance education and onsite, if possible, while recognizing that individual students in the programs might have taken a mix of onsite and distance education courses.

Program Outcomes

- Some sources of evidence include: faculty evaluations of portfolios, which give good insight into the quality of student work over time; grade comparison at the program level; and student performance in capstone courses.

- Where employment is a purpose, reviewers look for post-graduate follow-up data involving both the graduates and employers.

- A good practice is to ask faculty, assessment specialists and the academic leadership about how they analyze the data from various sources and use it to make improvements.

- Reviewers request specific information about what has been learned so far about the quality of the programs offered by the institution and what changes have been made as a result.

Assessment – Red Flags

- Students coming out of distance education courses that are prerequisites are not doing well in follow-up courses.

- Large numbers of students are not completing distance education courses, or are not persisting in the program.

- Trends over time indicate that the retention, persistence or completion rates for distance education courses and programs is declining.

- The same complaints are received from distance education students from semester to semester.

The End