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

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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.”

The Office of Postsecondary Education, in responding to these recommendations, agreed to engage in discussions with accrediting organization staff and other experts to identify best practices in the accreditation of distance education. Further, it agreed to use the information gathered from these discussions to develop guidance for staff in the Accreditation and State Liaison Unit to use in evaluating accrediting agency reviews of distance education when making an initial recommendation about whether to include the evaluation of distance education in an agency’s scope and when an agency petitions for renewal of recognition, and to share the guidance with the accreditation community.

The guidance contained in this report, which is in the form of best practices, was developed in a manner that is sensitive to the Department of Education’s limited authority to regulate accrediting agencies. The Department believes that accrediting agencies already have the authority to apply these best practices in their evaluation of distance education in the context of their individual standards.

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. One discussion group consisted of representatives from each of the seven regional accrediting agencies; the other included representatives from five of the ten national accrediting agencies that meet the criterion. Regional Accrediting Associations included Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges (SACS).

Next, Department staff asked the participating organizations to provide contact information for one or more individuals with experience serving on evaluation teams for schools offering distance education programs. Nineteen of the twenty educators recommended by the accrediting agencies agreed to be interviewed concerning how they have approached the evaluation of distance education and what they have considered to be appropriate evidence that the standards have been met. A complete list of participants is included at the end of this report.
RED FLAGS

Mission

Evaluators were clear about the importance of ensuring that distance education is appropriate to the mission of the institution under review. The rapid increase in the number of institutions offering distance education courses and programs in the last decade, and the pressure to launch distance education initiatives, can lead an institution or program in directions that are not congruent with its mission. The discussion around this issue yielded good examples of the kinds of evidence that reviewers have found to be indicative of a match between mission and distance education.

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

Historically, distance education was not part of the mainstream of higher education. At traditional institutions, it was often under the purview of the continuing education division, where administrative control was relatively strong and faculty often played different roles than in their academic units. In some continuing education operations and in less traditional institutions, the development of curricula and courses was centralized, with faculty serving on teams as “content experts” or “curriculum specialists”. The faculty/content expert/curriculum specialist might be one of several instructors – including adjunct faculty – assigned to teach the course, using the centrally-developed materials.

These models continue to be reflected in current practice at many institutions. Other institutions – particularly the more traditional institutions that are moving into online education – have employed existing academic structures in the development of their distance education courses and curricula. In these cases, faculty typically develop and teach their own courses. However, as these programs grow the likelihood of the institution
employing adjunct faculty with online teaching experience increases. Whatever the approach, reviewers look for evidence that the process used will result in coherent curricula and well-designed courses, and that there is appropriate academic oversight.

**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.

- 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.

- 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

Distance education places new demands on faculty. Most faculty come to distance education with classroom experience, and few have experienced distance education either as instructors or as students. They are used to functioning independently – developing courses without assistance from others and managing the classroom on their own. Conditions are different in a distance learning environment, where a support system needs to be in place to ensure a quality experience. 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.

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

Students who are enrolled in distance education programs often are unable to come to the campus or off-campus location for the administrative, student and academic services they need. 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. Advances in technology have had a significant impact on the way that institutions provide services, particularly administrative and library services, to all of their students. This has helped to narrow the differences in the way distance education and residential students are served, but it does not always result in distance education students receiving a full range of 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

As should be evident from the preceding information, successful distance education initiatives draw on many different types of expertise, which typically are provided by staff from various parts of an institution. In instances where distance education programs involve only one or two departments, the distance education support system may be housed in a special administrative unit that provides direct service and also functions as a liaison to the relevant institutional components. If the initiatives involve more than one or two departments, evaluators would look for evidence that the institution is using – or moving toward – a systemic approach whereby student, academic and faculty services related to distance education are integrated into the various components of the institution. This systemic approach is most conducive to long-term sustainability.

The potential for growth in enrollments in distance education programs is great. The demand is large, particularly by students who benefit from the flexibility of distance education to balance multiple demands on their time from work, family and community. The constraints on growth that are operative in site-based programs, including a geographically-limited potential market and classroom availability and capacity, do not apply to distance education. 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.

Red flags

- The distance education administrators are the only staff who discuss plans for distance education. Without executive commitment and knowledge, the institution is unlikely to have the resources in place to sustain the programs and support enrollment growth.

- 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. Without such agreements, there is a danger that changes in personnel will result in lack of support.

- The institution has a history of introducing programs and discontinuing them before enrolled students have had the opportunity to complete them.

- 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.

In the interviews, 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.

**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 are declining.

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