SPECIAL ARTICLES

Accreditation of Distance Education Programs: A Primer

Evan T. Robinson, PhD

School of Pharmacy, University of Charleston

Distance education within higher education has its share of challenges and considerations. The growth in distance education in the past 10 years is unprecedented, and somehow, the subsequent changes to the pedagogical model need to be considered. Irrespective of the various reasons for providing distance education, an institution should first address the single most important consideration, the provision of a quality educational experience. This article represents an overview of accreditation, the various types of accrediting associations (regional, national, specialized), and specific issues regarding how accreditation relates to the quality of distance education offerings.
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INTRODUCTION

The growth in distance education in the past 10 years is unprecedented and even institutions of higher education that would never have entered the distance education arena are now rethinking that decision. According to the 2002 report from the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), of the 5,635 institutions accredited throughout 17 regions, 1,979 offered some form of distance education.[1] One of the greatest challenges presented by distance learning is assuring that the quality of the education received is not compromised. The accreditation process helps institutions define quality and provides benchmarks for a well-designed learning environment. The challenge to the accrediting agencies is that distance education is shifting the focus of accreditation to such areas as computer-mediated classrooms, instruction separated by time and distance, and the availability of online student support services, while expecting quality to continue.[2] The purpose of this paper is to present an overview of accreditation and the various levels of accreditation that can impact institutions of higher education, specifically as related to distance education. The intent of this manuscript is not to suggest that accreditation represents the only means by which quality in higher education can be achieved, but to provide a primer on the different accrediting organizations and how they can provide practical and accessible information on how to benchmark successful educational practices and the benefits that can be derived through the accreditation process.

Corresponding Author: Evan T. Robinson, PhD. Address: Assistant Dean for Academic Affairs, University of Charleston School of Pharmacy, 2300 MacCorkle Ave. S.E., Charleston, WV 25304. Tel: 304-357-4860. E-mail: evanrobinson@ucwv.edu.

Accreditation Overview

Accreditation can be considered as an assurance of quality. According to Eaton (2002) the purposes of accreditation are to assure quality, provide access to federal funds, allow for ease of transfer of courses and programs among institutions of higher education, and to facilitate employee confidence in the institution.[2(p1)]

The recognition of accrediting agencies is done by 2 groups, the United States Department of Education (USDOE; http://www.ed.gov/index.jhtml) and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA; www.chea.org). The means by which an accrediting agency is reviewed for quality is through a process called "recognition" by one or both of these groups. In order to determine whether an accrediting agency is "recognized" one need only visit either site and view a list of recognized accrediting agencies.

Accreditation is a voluntary process for institutions of higher education. Although accreditation is not required, the term "voluntary" can be misleading. For example, there are good programs that are not accredited, but the lack of accreditation may limit their access to financial aid resources, or in the case of a school of pharmacy, prohibit a graduate from being able to take the national licensure examination (NABPLEX). Some specifics and values of accreditation beyond the general definition provided earlier are:

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;

9. Providing one of several considerations used as a basis for determining eligibility for Federal assistance.[3]

Within the list, points 3 (transfer credits) and 9 (Federal assistance) present very tangible reasons why accreditation, albeit voluntary, should be sought.

Types of Accrediting Agencies

There are different types of accrediting agencies and each considers the accreditation of distance education programs differently. Within this section the different types of accreditation will be identified, as well as how each relates to distance education accreditation. The different types of accreditation are not mutually exclusive. For example, an institution may be regionally accredited as well as have 3 programs subject to specialized accreditation.

Regional Accreditation

There are 6 regional accrediting agencies that evaluate and accredit the institution as a whole, but do not accredit its individual colleges and programs. An institution that achieves regional accreditation has demonstrated that each of its programs has met a level of quality that reflects upon the quality of the entire institution. Within each region the association may organize its accrediting commissions separately, so it is possible for variations in this list to occur (eg, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges separates the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education from the Commission on Technical and Career Institutions, while another region might merge these 2 entities into one group). The 6 regional accrediting agencies and their Web sites are:

- Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (MSA), www.css-msa.org;
- New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), www.neasc.org;
- North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA-HLC), www.ncahigherlearning-commission.org;
- Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges (NASC), www.nwccu.org;

- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), www.sacs.org;
- Western association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), www.wascweb.org;

In an effort to develop a common frame of reference regarding online or distance education offerings, the regional accrediting organizations collaborated to develop the "Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs," a document originally drafted by the Western Cooperative for Education Telecommunications (http://www.wcet.info/). The "Best Practices" was developed not only to give the regional accreditation organizations some degree of standardization but also to provide interested colleges and universities with guidelines on how to measure the quality of distance education offerings. The 5 topic areas within the "Best Practices" paper are:

- Institutional Context and Commitment
- Curriculum and Instruction
- Faculty Support
- Student Support
- Evaluation and Assessment

Each topic is followed by specific concerns regarding quality distance education offerings, which are in turn followed by several protocols or questions that should help an institution understand its preparedness for implementing distance education initiatives.[4] For example, within the section on "Student Support," the following statement is found: "The institution has a commitment – administrative, financial, and technical – to continuation of the program for a period sufficient to enable all admitted students to complete a degree or certificate in a publicized timeframe."[4]

These "Best Practices," in conjunction with "Statement of Commitment by the Regional Accrediting Commissions for the Evaluation of Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs," represent a significant step by the regional accrediting commissions towards the standardization of the accreditation of distance education offerings. The "Statement of Commitment" is a second joint document developed collaboratively to express the regional accrediting organizations commitment to supporting good practices in distance education. However, these documents represent a starting point and, as was explained within the "Best Practices" document, it is a work in progress, given the speed with which change occurs in the distance education arena. The challenge that yet remains is the degree to which these working documents over time yield clear, definitive evaluation guidelines and a consistent set of standards, not only for distance education, but also for onsite electronically mediated classes where onsite students are still learning virtually. In addition to these 2 documents, the different

regions also have materials that relate to the provision of distance education offerings as well, so each regional Web site should be checked periodically.

The creation of distance education programs should be carefully considered. A substandard distance-education offering would adversely impact the accreditation of the entire institution, so distance education initiatives should be appropriately discussed at all levels before any commitment is made. The parity between onsite and off-site programs must be clearly stated and defined with respect to all aspects of the education process, from academics to support services and educational resources such as library holdings. Significant programmatic changes could possibly be construed as "substantive changes" and trigger a request for more information or an automatic site visit. This is of course dependent upon the region in which the institution is located, so for clarification it is always best to contact your regional accrediting association office.

National Accreditation

National accreditation usually focuses on an entire institution that has a narrowly focused mission or delivery model rather than on institutions with a large variety of different programs. An example of an institution with a narrowly focused mission would be a college focusing on religion, while an example of an institution with a narrowly focused delivery model would be an institution whose programs are taught only online. According to the CHEA Web site there are currently 6 recognized national accrediting agencies within the United States and they are:

- Accrediting Association of Bible Colleges (AABC)
- Accrediting Commission of the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC)*
- Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS)
- Association of Advanced Rabbinical and Talmudic Schools (AARTS)
- Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (ATS)
- Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools Accreditation Commission) (TRACS).[5]

The national accrediting agency that is the most relevant for the purposes of this paper is the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC). This agency has its roots in the earliest methods of distance education, beginning with correspondence courses, and has adapted to the changes in educational delivery. DETC historically has accredited institutions whose delivery method is predominantly online. A change to that, however, has been

that DETC has begun to work with programs that are more residential in nature, in which case the accreditation conferred focuses upon the program that best fits its accreditation standards. This change is due to the increasing number of colleges and universities that offer both residential and distance-education offerings.

DETC accreditation, which is voluntary, can be seen as institutional improvement in that it has more specificity with respect to distance education offerings than either regional or specialized accrediting organizations. Institutions are not motivated to seek out DETC accreditation for monetary reasons, since DETC accreditation does not make an institution eligible for federal financial aid. The guidelines and standards proposed by DETC represent sound practices that would benefit colleges or universities seeking to provide distance education. All of the guidelines and information for DETC, as well as a list of accredited institutions, are available from their Web site (www.detc.org). Some examples of the materials available via the Web site include *Benefits of DETC Accreditation*; *DETC Accreditation Overview 2002*; *DETC Business Standards, May 2003*; and *Preparing an Effective Self-Evaluation Report*.[6]

Specialized Accreditation

Specialized accrediting agencies evaluate individualized programs within an institution, such as law, medicine, pharmacy, and business, which may or may not have received regional accreditation for the entire institution. One example specific to pharmacy regarding the need for specialized accreditation is that in order to sit for the national licensure examination (NAPLEX), graduates must have attended a school of pharmacy accredited by the Accreditation Council on Pharmacy Education (ACPE). The list of specialized accrediting agencies is too large to print within this publication. To see a list, please visit the Web site of either the United States Department of Education (http://www.ed.gov/index.jhtml) or the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (www.chea.org).

As previously mentioned, these different types of accreditation are not mutually exclusive. They do, however, have some differences relating to how they evaluate the quality of distance education offerings. For example, one difference between a specialized accreditation agency and a regional agency is the use of competency standards or outcomes by specialized accrediting agencies. These agencies evaluate programs that are focused on a relatively narrow window of knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

Results from a recent study by the Council on Higher Education Accreditation indicate that few specialized accrediting organizations are changing their standards to specifically address distance education, but

instead are adding language indicating that the standards must be met regardless of the "...type of instructional methodology used."[7] This is an interesting finding in that there are many individuals who believe distance education is a pedagogical alternative and nothing more. This being said, ensuring that the motivating reason for an institution seeking to enter the distance education arena is consistent with the institution's mission and philosophy and that adequate resources are provided to support the venture is important.

The specialized accrediting body for colleges and schools of pharmacy, the Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE), also maintains the position that distance education is a pedagogical alternative. When used to deliver 25% or more of the entry-level curriculum, distance education is simultaneously viewed as a "substantive change" that may require additional monitoring. [Personal communication. American Council on Pharmaceutical Education, October 21, 2003.] Consultation via calls to and from the ACPE office and additional monitoring through focused site visits is a common practice that is not exclusive to distance learning and may be necessary during changes in leadership, increases in student enrollment, and changes in faculty composition and size at a college or school. Although the anxiety produced by additional scrutiny from one's specialized accrediting agency is rarely welcome, the ultimate intent of that attention is to document the state of a program relative to accreditation standards, point out areas of strength and weakness, and provide guidance to help assure overall program quality.

Specialized accrediting agencies are also attempting to improve their own ability to evaluate the quality of programs using distance learning by reviewing and revising their standards. Many agencies are searching for outcome-based measures, as defined by the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for success within a given discipline, on which to make more objective accrediting decisions. Accreditation organizations are recognized by the Department of Education (DOE), which requires accrediting agencies to revise their standards on a regular basis. In fact, ACPE is currently requesting comments to update its standards and guidelines. For more information on the request for comments, please visit the ACPE Web site (www.acpe-accredit.org) or contact the office by telephone to speak with a staff member. Although formal standards revision occurs for a specific period of time, constructive comments and criticism are always considered. For example, recent experiences from a school undergoing focused monitoring have been used to improve ACPE's process for reviewing programs

using distance education. The assurance of quality in a dynamic educational environment while being responsive to a variety of views on the value of distance learning is a difficult but not insurmountable task for specialized accrediting agencies. Only time, experience, and good feedback regarding what has worked and what has not worked will determine the impact distance learning will have on the quality of professional education.

Indicators of Quality for Distance Education Programs

Accreditation is the assurance of quality. Given that, there should be some aspects within institutions of higher education that should be considered when developing a quality distance education offering. The following list, compiled from a variety of sources (one being the "Best Practices"), briefly presents institutional considerations when developing distance education offerings.

- Institutional Mission and Intent: Is the mission of the institution consistent with its intent to provide educational programming at a distance? Why is the institution interested in distance education programs?
- Institutional Support: Is the institution committed to allocating resources to a distance education initiative and is that commitment in terms of personnel, finances, etc?
- Curriculum and Instruction: Does the institution have the appropriate courses matched with the appropriate outcomes, how is it ensuring that outcomes are being met, is the technology being appropriately used, etc?
- Faculty Support: Is the institution providing resources that help develop the faculty to provide online instruction and has it given appropriate consideration to the issues of faculty load, content ownership, copyright, intellectual property, etc?
- Student Support: Does the institution provide distance learners with access to advisors, facilities, learning resources, counseling, and accommodation of students with learning disabilities, etc?
- Assessment and Evaluation: How is the program's effectiveness begin evaluated, are the outcomes being reviewed for clarity, what is being done to compare learner performance to intended learning outcome, etc?

The list of quality indicators provided above is intended to provide an overview of the topics that should be considered. For more detailed information, the reader should see the "Best Practices" statement, "Quality On the Line: Benchmarks for Success in Internet-Based Distance

Education," prepared by the Institute for Higher Education Policy, "Accreditation and Assuring Quality in Distance Learning," CHEA Monograph Series 2002, Number 1, and "Specialized Accreditation and Assuring Quality in Distance Learning, CHEA Monograph Series 2002, Number 2. Both are available via the CHEA website at www.chea.org. Also, as previously recommended, contact other programs delivering good distance education programs to seek their guidance as well as the accrediting agencies.

Recommendations

The following list of recommendations is a starting point, nothing more, when considering the issues of distance education accreditation.

- Review the "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."
- Visit the Web sites and contact your regional accrediting agency to get additional information. Some agencies have additional information on distance education accreditation and the extra guidance may well be helpful.
- View the various accrediting agencies as resources, not as adversaries. All too often individuals do not call the agencies for fear of identifying a problem at their institution – get over the fear.
- Contact successful programs and seek their guidance. There is too much experience out there for anyone to blindly venture into distance education.
- Whether your institution is considering national accreditation or not from the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC), visit their Web site for some information. The information DETC provides can assist an institution in evaluating and improving the quality of distance education offerings.
- Be careful of unrecognized accreditation agencies. Just like there are diploma mills, there are now accreditation mills, so be careful if approached by a group offering accreditation.

CONCLUSIONS

Institutions looking to enter the distance education arena must understand what constitutes quality and what is necessary for success before ever offering the first online course. Given the number of programs providing quality distance education offerings and the materials available via the regional, national, and specialized accrediting organizations, no institution program should take an uninformed step without first understanding the challenges that lie before them. Finally, be prepared for change and debate as more institutions move online and the accreditation of distance education programs continues to evolve.

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