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Principles of Good Practice for Distance Learning Programs

by Barbara Krauth

The Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET), a program of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), is at the forefront of a growing movement to develop guidelines for evaluating distance learning programs. The Western Cooperative's project, *Balancing Quality and Access: Reducing State Policy Barriers to Electronically Delivered Higher Education*,¹ is only one of several efforts under way to develop "standards" or "principles" for higher education programs delivered via telecommunications. The project's overall goal is to encourage the interstate delivery of high quality education programs via electronic means to students in the Western states. At its heart are two questions: what does "quality" mean, and how can it be addressed?

The quality question is being asked by a variety of interested parties, for up to now there has been nothing to guide the review of electronically offered programs from any relevant perspective. That is, neither state agencies responsible for approving higher education programs, the regional accrediting associations, institutions involved in developing programs for delivery at a distance, nor students curious about whether they might pursue their educational goals via telecommunications have had any way to judge the quality of programs delivered by technology.

A number of regional and national organizations are now involved in efforts to develop standards for distance learning programs. These groups include the regional higher education accrediting associations' Task Force on Distance Learning and The Alliance, a group formed by the American Council on Education. The efficacy of learning by means of technology is not itself being questioned in these current efforts. Research and evaluation studies put that issue to rest long ago. Instead, the quality concern focuses on issues related to student support and to program integrity: Will students in "virtual" learning situations be isolated, with no semblance of human contact with their instructors or other students? How can effective advising and academic sup-

port services be made available to distance learning students? How can students in such programs be sure that their learning experiences will equal those on campuses and that their degrees will be seen as equivalent to a traditionally delivered degree program?

Regional accrediting associations, too, are at last beginning to acknowledge that traditional means of evaluating an institution's services must be revised when looking at programs delivered off campus. The number of books in the library is no longer the relevant issue, for example. Rather, what is important is whether and which technological means are available to assist students at a distance or in rural areas in accessing information resources.

The WCET's Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs are based on: (1) research on states' policies for reviewing and approving higher education programs proposed for offering by out-of-state institutions, and (2) extensive reviews, discussions, and comments by higher education leaders in the West.

We recognize that these Principles—or any principles or standards, for that matter—are not the final answer on the issue of quality. They provide only an initial framework for developing the real policies that must emerge from and reflect specific environments. We also know that the Principles cannot help state agencies to regulate many of the programs delivered across state lines via telecommunications. There is no real way to predict, for example, the location of a student studying over the Internet. However much state regulatory agencies would like to control the operation of education that "takes place" within their boundaries, in reality they have no way to stop unscrupulous providers from offering such programs within their state.

Nevertheless, we believe that the Principles of Good Practice can be of genuine assistance in addressing the quality issue. Through widespread dissemination, discussion, and broad endorsement by the higher education community, the Principles of Good Practice can benefit a variety of constituents:

¹ This project is supported by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE).

Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Academic Degree and Certificate Programs

Preamble

These Principles are the product of a Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications project, Balancing Quality and Access: Reducing State Policy Barriers to Electronically Delivered Higher Education Programs. The three-year project, supported by the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, is designed to foster an interstate environment that encourages the electronic provision of quality higher education programs across state lines. The Principles have been developed by a group representing the Western states' higher education regulating agencies, higher education institutions, and the regional accrediting community.

Recognizing that the context for learning in our society is undergoing profound changes, those charged with developing the Principles have tried not to tie them to or compare them to traditional campus structures. The Principles are also designed to be sufficiently flexible that institutions offering a range of programs—from graduate degrees to certificates—will find them useful.

Several assumptions form the basis for these Principles:

- ✦ The electronically offered program is provided by or through an institution that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting body.
- ✦ The institution's programs holding specialized accreditation meet the same requirements when offered electronically.
- ✦ The "institution" may be a traditional higher education institution, a consortium of such institutions, or another type of organization or entity.
- ✦ These Principles address programs rather than individual courses.
- ✦ It is the institution's responsibility to review educational programs it provides via technology in terms of its own internally applied definitions of these Principles.

Curriculum and Instruction

- ✦ Each program of study results in learning outcomes appropriate to the rigor and breadth of the degree or certificate awarded.
- ✦ An electronically offered degree or certificate program is coherent and complete.
- ✦ The program provides for appropriate real-time or delayed interaction between faculty and students and among students.
- ✦ Qualified faculty provide appropriate oversight of the program electronically offered.

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Institutional Context and Commitment

Role and Mission

- ✦ The program is consistent with the institution's role and mission.
- ✦ Review and approval processes ensure the appropriateness of the technology being used to meet the program's objectives.

Faculty Support

- ✦ The program provides faculty support services specifically related to teaching via an electronic system.
- ✦ The program provides training for faculty who teach via the use of technology.

Resources for Learning

- ✦ The program ensures that appropriate learning resources are available to students.

Students and Student Services

- ✦ The program provides students with clear, complete, and timely information on the curriculum, course and degree requirements, nature of faculty/student interaction, assumptions about technological competence and skills, technical equipment requirements, availability of academic support services and financial aid resources, and costs and payment policies.
- ✦ Enrolled students have reasonable and adequate access to the range of student services appropriate to support their learning.
- ✦ Accepted students have the background, knowledge, and technical skills needed to undertake the program.
- ✦ Advertising, recruiting, and admissions materials clearly and accurately represent the program and the services available.

Commitment to Support

- ✦ Policies for faculty evaluation include appropriate consideration of teaching and scholarly activities related to electronically offered programs.
- ✦ The institution demonstrates a commitment to ongoing support, both financial and technical, and to continuation of the program for a period sufficient to enable students to complete a degree/certificate.

Evaluation and Assessment

- ✦ The institution evaluates the program's educational effectiveness, including assessments of student learning outcomes, student retention, and student and faculty satisfaction. Students have access to such program evaluation data.
- ✦ The institution provides for assessment and documentation of student achievement in each course and at completion of the program.

"While they do not in themselves constitute policy, the Principles identify the areas that are crucial to address in policy development."

When Distance Education Crosses State Boundaries: Western States' Policies 1995 summarizes the western states' policies and regulations governing higher education programs electronically delivered across state lines. The booklet is available from WCET through WICHE Publications (\$9.00 postage paid). To order, call 303-541-0290 and ask for publication #2A260.

Higher education institutions. The Principles can support the efforts of colleges and universities interested in developing and providing quality distance learning programs. By communicating some guidelines to enable such institutions to gauge their own degree of success, the Principles of Good Practice can provide a useful tool for institutions' self-assessment. While they do not in themselves constitute policy, the Principles identify the areas that are crucial to address in policy development. The Principles might also eventually serve as a kind of "Seal of Approval," enabling private, for-profit program providers to advertise their efforts to meet quality standards.

The regional accrediting associations. The accrediting associations' Task Force on Distance Education has agreed to use the language of the Principles as the basis for standards being developed to address distance learning. As of this writing, the boards of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Institutions and the junior college division of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges have adopted the Principles exactly as written for inclusion in their handbooks for accreditation.

State higher education regulatory agencies and boards. Higher education offices in several Western states have committed themselves to using the Principles in their review of electronically delivered programs proposed by in-state colleges and universities. (States that have so far agreed to this policy include Alaska, Colorado, Montana, New Mexico, and South Dakota.) In addition, the Western Legislators' Conference passed a resolution encouraging all Western states to consider adopting the Principles as the basis for in-state assessments. The next step in WICHE's project is to encourage the development of reciprocal agreements whereby any "receiving" state could rely on a home state's review to ensure that the proposed program meets the Principles of Good Practice. Such agreements would in turn benefit program providers by ensuring that they would no longer have to meet the disparate requirements of fifty states' regulations.

Prospective students. Empowering the learner is, finally, the only real way to ensure that higher education programs delivered via technology are of high quality. In this regard, the Principles can help prospective students identify the questions to ask of provider institutions. It will be up to students to ask these questions and to make sure they get satisfactory answers. Staff of the Balancing Quality and Access project are developing brochures on distance learning and the Principles of Good Practice to help students understand how to ensure that educational programming delivered to their homes and work

places conveys the quality they are entitled to expect.

It now seems possible that the Principles of Good Practice may become the basis for national agreement on the standards for education programs delivered via technology. If so, they will eventually provide—in most cases, for the first time—a basis for assessing the quality of electronically offered programs. C/E

Future Perfect...

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We need to demonstrate to our presidents that we know how to consolidate our economic gains and change the ways of doing business to benefit from the constantly improving technology available to us. The lesson to learn is that while technological change is constant, our implementation of technology is discrete, although ongoing. We must not let the constancy of technological change blind our ability to consolidate our productivity gains by modifying our personal and institutional behavior.

One of the best pieces of advice I have ever received was to understand that "life is what is happening while you're busy making other plans." We have incorporated much of our networked information technology into our daily lives already. There are presentations that I prepare in hours and days with information that would have taken weeks to obtain without today's networked information—and the information is more current and up to date. Electronic journals abound. And the Web gives me more digitized graphics and photos than I thought, as recently as two years ago, would be commonly available by now.

However, we still have scholarly journals increasing in price in some science and medical fields at 15–18 percent per year at a time of 2–3 percent inflation. The price of scholarly information in general has increased more than inflation. The technology is exciting and being incorporated into our daily activities, but our organizational and economic policy issues persist. To help our executive leadership we need to be vigilant and aggressive in identifying the barriers to changing our personal and institutional behavior to "advance productivity." If we do that successfully, the investment and support we are seeking for our future perfect world of networked information will come quite automatically. C/E