

Distance Education Evaluation:

What are other institutions doing?

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Regional higher education accrediting agencies are charged with ensuring that distance education programs meet the same standards as on-campus programs.

(Lezberg, 1998)

In response to this new paradigm of higher education, the eight regional accrediting agencies have collaborated to establish best practices for accrediting electronically offered degrees and certificate programs.

(SACSCOC, 2000; WICHE, 2000)

As a result of the effort by the accrediting agencies, the resulting best practices were divided into the five components of:

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

Institutional Context and Commitment

- Electronically offered programs and degrees should support and extend the roles of the educational institution.
- Programs should be consistent with the institution's role and mission.
- Institution should also have adequate technical infrastructure and technical support.

Institutional Context and Commitment (cont.)

- Researchers agree that universities are using distance education to reach extended audiences.
- Additionally, to varying degrees, universities are providing the necessary infrastructure and technical support for distance education.
- See Keast, 1997; Murphrey & Dooley, 2000; Olcott, 1992.

Curriculum and Instruction

- Curriculum and instructional decisions need to be made by qualified professionals and focus on the intended outcomes for a diverse student population.
- Decisions should also be based on pedagogical considerations, not technical ones and appropriate interaction is reflected in instruction.

Curriculum and Instruction (cont.)

- This component has been the subject of many studies evaluating delivery methods of distance education and assessing interaction in distance education courses.
- Researchers have generally supported the notion that effective instruction has taken place at many institutions using distance education technologies.
- See Lara, Howell, Dominguez, & Navarro, 2001; Machtmes & Asher, 2000; Rost, 2000; Shih & Gamon, 2001; Vrasidas & Mclsaac, 1999.

Faculty Support

- Institutions should provide the necessary support, training, and incentives for faculty who deliver distance education courses.
- Researchers have studied the support and training needs of faculty members associated with distance education.
- Incentives for faculty involvement in distance education have also been studied.

Faculty Support (cont.)

- Research indicates that the needs of faculty members must be met for distance education to be successful.
- See Irani & Telg, 2001; Jackson, 1994; Muilenburg & Berge, 2001; Murphy & Dooley, 2001; Murphy & Terry, 1998; Wolcott, 1997.

Student Support

- This component indicates that distance education students should have access to all of the same student services as their on-campus counterparts.
- Off-campus students also have additional needs that should be met by the institution.

Student Support (cont.)

- Studies that have evaluated off-campus students' access to support services housed on-campus and indicate that many universities are providing the necessary support services to students.
- See Curry, Baldwin, & Sharpe, 1998; Kascus, 1994.

Evaluation and Assessment

- This component states that student assessment and program evaluation have added importance in distance education due to policy and budget decisions that may result.
- Results of these assessments and evaluations can be used to guide curriculum design and delivery, pedagogy, and educational processes. These results may also affect future policy and budgets with regards to distance education.

Evaluation and Assessment (cont.)

- Student assessment has often been the focus of research, showing that off-campus students achieved at the same or higher level than on-campus students.
- See Lindner, Dooley, & Murphy, 2001; Navarro & Shoemaker, 2000.

Evaluation and Assessment (cont.)

- However, studies that look at formal program and course evaluation are currently missing from the research base.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to ascertain the distance education evaluation practices of higher education institutions.

To achieve this purpose, this study had four objectives:

1. Describe the distance education audiences and delivery methods of participating institutions of higher education.
2. Describe the contents of the distance education evaluation instruments used by these institutions.

Objectives (cont.)

3. Describe the method of collecting distance education evaluation data used by these institutions.
4. Describe the methodology used by the institutions to develop distance education evaluation instruments.

Methodology

- Two groups of institutions were surveyed in this study. A questionnaire, with a series of descriptive items, was used to conduct the study.
- American Distance Education Consortium (ADEC) – composed primarily of agriculturally related institutions
- Research Level I/AAU (American Association of Universities) member institutions, identified in a list from r1edu.org

Methodology (cont.)

ADEC Members

- a list of primary contact officers (n=57) was available
- email was chosen as the initial delivery method for the questionnaire, following procedures outlined by Dillman (2000)
- non-respondents were sent a copy of the questionnaire through the mail
- 18 ADEC members responded for a 32 percent response rate

Methodology (cont.)

Research I/AAU Institutions (n=33)

- contact information was obtained from the Provost/Vice President responsible for distance education at each institution (n=24)
- mail was chosen as the delivery method for the questionnaire, following procedures outlined by Dillman (2000)
- 13 Research I institutions responded for a 54 percent response rate

Methodology (cont.)

- The researchers concluded that those who responded are those who have an interest in evaluating distance education and the necessary knowledge to provide the needed information for this study.
 - Coaxing responses from the remaining contact people would have provided inaccurate data and skewed the results of this study.
- (Miller & Carr 1997)

Results

Table 1: Institutional Respondents

University of Arkansas – Pine Bluff (ADEC)	University of Colorado (R1)
University of California – Berkeley (R1)	Delaware State College (ADEC)
University of California – Irvine (R1)	Florida A & M University (ADEC)
University of California – Los Angeles (R1)	University of Idaho (ADEC)
University of California – Santa Barbara (R1)	Indiana University (R1)
Chief Dull Knife College (ADEC)	John Hopkins University (R1)
	Kansas State University (ADEC)
	University of Kentucky (ADEC)
	Louisiana State University (ADEC)

Table 1: Institutional Respondents (cont.)

University of Maryland – Eastern Shore (ADEC)	University of Oregon (R1)
College of the Menominee Nation (ADEC)	Pennsylvania State University (ADEC & R1)
University of Missouri – Columbia (ADEC)	Rutgers University (ADEC)
University of Nebraska – Lincoln (ADEC & R1)	University of Tennessee (ADEC)
New York University (R1)	Texas A & M University (ADEC)
University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill (R1)	University of Texas (R1)
	Washington State University (ADEC)
	West Virginia University (ADEC)

Table 2: Delivery Audience Level

Level	Frequency	Percent
Undergraduate	9	29
Graduate	6	19
Both	16	52

Table 3: Distance Technologies

Technology	Frequency	Percent
Course Mgmt Software	26	84
World Wide Web	26	84
Interactive Video Conf.	22	71
Video Tapes	13	42

Table 4: Focus of Evaluations

Focus	Frequency	Percent
Instructors	30	97
Course Org. & Delivery	27	87
Support Services	22	71
No Evaluation Utilized	1	3

Table 5: Administration of Evaluations

Method	Frequency	Percent
Electronically Only	12	39
Electronically & Mail	7	23
Mail Only	3	10
Electronically & In-Person	2	6
In-Person	2	6
No Evaluation Utilized	1	3
Not Indicated	4	12

Table 6: Content of Evaluation Instruments

Source	Frequency	Percent
Exact Same as On-campus	1	3
On-campus w/a few revisions	18	58
Designed Specifically for DE	10	32
No Evaluation Utilized	1	3
Not Indicated	1	3

Conclusions

- Most institutions are delivering distance education to both undergraduate and graduate students.
- This conclusion contradicts the National Center for Education Statistics report, which reports that most institutions offer distance education courses only at the undergraduate level (Lewis, Snow, Farris, Levin, & Greene, 1999).

Conclusions (cont.)

- Most institutions are using course management software and the World Wide Web. Additionally, to a lesser extent, video conferencing and videotapes are used to deliver distance education.
- This conclusion is consistent with the National Center for Education Statistics report of distance technologies use by institutions of higher education (Lewis et al., 1999).

Conclusions (cont.)

- Instructors are the most common focus of evaluations, closely followed by course organization & delivery and support services.
- This conclusion is consistent with the findings of Biner, Dean, and Mellinger (1994).

Conclusions (cont.)

- Most institutions utilize an electronically delivered format to administer their distance education evaluation instrument.
- It is not surprising that electronic methods were most widely reported, as Dillman (2000) indicates that delivering surveys electronically can save time and money.
- However, given the variability of how these instruments are administered, it does suggest that there may be few standards, as yet, for optimum delivery of evaluation instrumentation.

Conclusions (cont.)

- The most common method for developing a distance education evaluation instrument was to make a few revisions to the on-campus instrument already utilized at each institution.
- This procedure is supported by the literature. For example, in their study evaluating a distance education course, Dooley, Patil, and Lineberger (2000) utilized the existing on-campus evaluation form, along with additional formative and summative evaluation instruments.

Implications/Recommendations

- Distance education evaluation is inconsistent. While some institutions take a more holistic approach of evaluating all aspects of distance education, others evaluate just the instructors. Given the great amount of resources invested in distance education, it is recommended that a holistic approach is utilized.

Implications/Recommendations (cont.)

- Therefore, it is recommended that empirical data be collected to determine the facets of distance education that should be evaluated. This data should be utilized to develop a holistic distance education evaluation instrument that takes the uniqueness of varying delivery methods into account.

Implications/Recommendations (cont.)

- Given the variation in methodology utilized to administer the distance education evaluation instruments, further research is warranted to determine if the administration methodology affects the results of the evaluation.

Where are we going from here?

We have begun the process of collecting empirical data to develop an appropriate distance education evaluation instrument.

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