

Deciphering Distance Learning Accreditation:  
A Balance of Obstacles and Opportunities

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Abstract

Distance learning presents new challenges to traditional accreditation that have been difficult to answer or resolve. Although prior challenges to the status quo in accreditation have come through the explosion of general enrollments, the proliferation of community colleges, the extension of international programming, and the widespread infusion of part-time and non-degree students, distance education causes difficulties never before encountered (CHEA, 2002). The challenge is to delineate what should be the same as brick and mortar institutions, and what can be allowed to be different. To address this question, this paper presents the current state of distance education, how accreditation is conducted for distance education and the problems encountered in this process, and the benefits and opportunities available through the operations and evaluation of distance education.

## Introduction

Almost a decade ago, online education unabashedly entered the realm of higher education, and since then the proliferation of distance learning and technology use has dramatically altered the landscape of colleges and universities. Parallel to the surge in distance education have been extensive efforts to ensure quality control for the new educational offerings. Quality in distance learning has been monitored primarily through accreditation, the process by which higher education institutions are scrutinized by internal and external peer review (CHEA, 2002).

Distance learning presents new challenges to traditional accreditation that have been difficult to answer or resolve. Although prior challenges to the status quo in accreditation have come through the explosion of general enrollments, the proliferation of community colleges, the extension of international programming, and the widespread infusion of part-time and non-degree students, distance education causes difficulties never before encountered (CHEA, 2002). The challenge is to delineate what should be the same as brick and mortar institutions, and what can be allowed to be different. To address this question, this paper presents the current state of distance education, how accreditation is conducted for distance education and the problems encountered in this process, and the benefits and opportunities available through the operations and evaluation of distance education. The significance of these issues should only continue to increase, confirming the view that “the ability of accreditors to develop appropriate quality assurance procedures for expanding technologies and innovative delivery systems

will be a central issue for determining the success of peer-based accreditation in the next century” (Bloland, 2001, p. 204).

### The Current Prevalence of Distance Education

Distance education, as defined by the American Association of University Professors (1998), is “the process whereby the education of a student occurs in circumstances where the educator and the student are geographically separated, and the communication across this distance is accomplished by one or more forms of technology” (p. 32). It includes asynchronous and synchronous learning environments that use a wide variety of pedagogical modes, such as computer-mediated instruction, computer or audio conferencing, television, videocassettes or disks, or Internet-based instruction (CHEA, 2002). The primary providers of distance education are the armed forces, corporate universities, unaffiliated distance education providers, and postsecondary providers (such as traditional institutions of higher education), with the last group having the largest enrollments (Bloland, 2001). Patterns for distance learning include additions to campus-based instruction, collaboratives or consortia, brokered or contracted arrangements, and virtual universities (Bloland, 2001). One example of these newer patterns is that traditional degree-providing institutions have created for-profit subsidiaries to respond to the demand for distance education (Eaton, 2001). Virtual universities are becoming more mainstream, one example being Jones International University, the first virtual institution to be accredited by a regional association. With the rapid and widespread growth of distance education, however, there is heightened concern about fraud and abuse (Loane, 2001).

Distance education is certainly not new, and accrediting bodies have been reviewing correspondence courses for over a century. The U.S. Department of Education reported that in 1997-1998, 1,680 accredited institutions were providing distance education for 1.6 million students (CHEA, 2001). Predicting numbers since that time is difficult; although one would expect the numbers to be much higher than in 1998, the recent failure of many distance education offerings has probably tempered the explosion of online learning that occurred in the late 1990s. Nevertheless, Kariya (2003) noted that while the annual market of distance education at that time equaled about \$4.5 billion, by 2005 it is expected to expand to \$11 billion. Much of this growth comes from the international demand for distance learning, as students from countries such as China, India, and South Korea increasingly enroll in online courses. Even in the United States, students' desires to have accessible and accelerated educational experiences that can be facilitated by distance education ensure that online learning and other forms of distributed learning are not just a passing fad.

#### Accreditation Review for Distance Education

Accreditation for distance education offerings comes from regional, national, and specialized accreditors, and government and society have relied on the quality reviews of such organizations for the last 50 years to determine the eligibility of institutions to receive federal funds for student financial assistance (CHEA, 2002). One statistic illustrating the importance of accreditation for distance education in this regard is that “approximately four out of five students at proprietary schools receive federal student aid, as compared to one out of three undergraduates attending public nonprofit institutions” (CHEA, 2002, p. 5). Although such tangible consequences of accreditation

are indeed important, Young, Chambers, and Kells (1983) argue that “the primary value of accreditation is to be found in the process itself, not in the formal result of the process” (p. x). The process of self-evaluation that leads to self-improvement is guided by the accrediting bodies that create external review teams to evaluate institutional quality.

The accreditors themselves are monitored by the U.S. Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA, 2002). CHEA is a “nationally based, private, non-profit organization that coordinates national, regional, and specialized accreditation and represents 3,000 degree-granting accredited institutions and 59 accrediting organizations” (CHEA, 2001), and this organization has written extensively on the inherent challenges of distance education accreditation. Accreditation in general certainly is not a foolproof process, and a number of scholars have described its weaknesses (Bender, 1983; Marcus, 1983; Wright, 2002). Wright (2002) observed, however, that although “accreditation standards may seem so generic as to allow all sorts of wiggle room, though self-studies and visiting teams vary in quality and the rhythm of fifth-year reports, and decennial reaffirmation may seem so sluggish as to be utterly ineffectual,” the accreditation process succeeds in improving educational quality in a surprising manner (p. 253).

The standards, guidelines, and policies used for accreditation vary by the type of program or institution that is reviewed, as well as by the accreditor, although typically the institutional features of mission, resources, organization, curriculum and instruction, student and faculty support, and student learning outcomes are somehow measured (CHEA, 2001, 2002). Questions concerning these seven areas are outlined in Table 1 below:

**Table 1**

Accrediting organizations routinely review seven key areas of institutional activity when examining the quality of distance learning:
▪ Institutional mission: Does offering distance learning make sense in this situation?
▪ Institutional organizational structure: Is the institution suitably structured to offer quality distance learning?
▪ Institutional resources: Does the institution sustain adequate financing to offer quality distance learning?
▪ Curriculum and instruction: Does the institution have appropriate curricula and design of instruction to offer quality distance learning?
▪ Faculty support: Are competent faculty engaged in offering distance learning and do they have adequate resources, facilities, and equipment?
▪ Student support: Do students have needed counseling, advising, equipment, facilities, and instructional materials to pursue distance learning?
▪ Student learning outcomes: Does the institution routinely evaluate the quality of distance learning based on evidence of student achievement?

(CHEA, 2002, p. 7)

The specific standards prescribed by each of the accreditors clarify what they want institutions to accomplish in each of these areas, and the standards differ for each association. For example, in the area of faculty support, the statement from the regional accrediting organizations requires that institutions must supply “an ongoing program of appropriate technical, design, and production support for faculty. The institution must also provide orientation and training to those participating in the program to help them become proficient in the uses of the program’s technology” (CHEA, 2002, p. 11). Other accreditors, such as the Distance Education & Training Council (DETC), require that “the institution must have a sufficient number of qualified instructors to give individualized instructional service to each student” (CHEA, 2002, p. 11). In the area of curriculum and instruction, institutions are asked to analyze whether certain subjects are appropriate for distance education (e.g., a chemistry course that typically requires lab work), and whether

the available technology can support intended pedagogical activities (CHEA, 2002). Despite the different nuances that spell out what is requisite in each of these categories, accreditors for distance education typically provide institutions with great flexibility in how they go about accomplishing the required standards (CHEA, 2002). Eaton (2000) notes that “regional distance learning guidelines tend to focus on the similarities between sited-based education and electronically based education, paying less attention to the differences between teaching and learning” (p. 3). She suggests that by accommodating distance education within the existing standards, the differences between modes of delivery are probably minimized. If differences are ignored too much, students’ needs in distance education can go unmet.

Accreditation review is always voluntary, but usually deemed desirable by institutions to both enhance reputation and allow federal funding for students. Because accreditation allows for both quality assessment and quality enhancement (Millard, 1994), it can serve both formative and summative goals. The eight regional accrediting bodies that provide quality assessment for traditional, degree-granting, non-profit institutions in the U.S. collaboratively established a set of guidelines for distance education in 2001, entitled, “The Statement of Commitment by the Regional Accrediting Commissions for the Evaluation of Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs.” This platform allows for common conceptions about critical aspects of distance learning, and these understandings both support and inform the processes and policies within each region (CHEA, 2002). Greater consistency between regions is essential in distance education because of the fluid nature of online learning, which tends to blur the regional boundaries.

The nine national accrediting bodies that primarily review for-profit degree or non-degree institutions or faith-based institutions have less coherence in their standards. Of these nine commissions, one accreditor (DETC) only reviews distance education offerings, one has developed new standards for distance education, another has developed supplemental standards, and a number use the same standards for distance education as they do for site-based learning (CHEA, 2001). The national accreditors often require institutions to provide additional reports, special site visits, and increased attention to learning outcomes (CHEA, 2001). These added obligations can cause providers of distance education to feel that they are being treated unfairly, in that more is required of them to demonstrate legitimacy. Higher standards stem from a higher burden of proof, necessitated in administrators' minds by the newer, untested forms of delivery. The stringent requirements are furthered heightened by the current culture of assessment, which continues to grow in significance. On this point, Wright (2002) argues that "the single most powerful contributor to assessment's staying power has been its championing by regional and professional accreditors" (p. 253).

#### Challenges to Accreditation Posed by Distance Education

Distance education confronts six foundational values held by regional accreditors: site-based education, institutional autonomy, the predominance of degrees (e.g., associate, baccalaureate, etc.), general education, collegiality and shared governance, and the academic and intellectual authority held by faculty (Eaton, 2000). Reviewing the values one by one elucidates why distance education has made many people in higher education extremely nervous. By "identifying the distinctive features of distance learning, adjusting accreditation scrutiny to reflect those distinctive features, and paying more

attention to student learning outcomes,” accreditors can better address the challenges to these values (Eaton, 2001, p. 16).

Since distance education can draw students from across accreditation regions, the importance of location is diminishing. Some accreditors voice concern that distance education lacks the advantages available through residential or site-based learning, benefits that include libraries, student services, and the community of learning that often exists in traditional classrooms. The government is highly aware of the pressure distance education is putting on the “site-based model of quality and self-regulation, and is watching carefully to see how successfully institutions and accreditors respond to this challenge” (Eaton, 2001, p. 12).

Alternative designs of instruction (e.g., computer-mediated classrooms and the availability of online services) that can diminish faculty-student contact prompts criticism from educators who value the interpersonal connections made in face-to-face settings (CHEA, 2002). To address these concerns, accreditors can scrutinize specific features in the distance learning environment; for example, if classes are using computer based instruction, then reviewers can look for student support that makes up for the limited or absent face-to-face contact (CHEA, 2002). The lack of face time requires teachers to increase the communication and guidance provided to students, as well as extra encouragement when students are struggling. Teachers cannot expect to have the same success if they teach distance education classes without changing their strategies (Eaton, 2001).

Institutional autonomy is challenged by distance education, in that electronic means of delivery facilitate the creations of consortia and other collaborations between

institutions; institutional structures in distance learning may also vary based on whether institutions subcontract or establish other arrangements in delivering distance education, instead of providing it for students themselves (CHEA, 2002). The growth of such collaborations reflects “an expanding and diversifying relationship between the nonprofit education community and the for-profit business world” (Eaton, 2001, p. 8). In evaluating such collaborations, accreditors must ensure that outside providers “sustain a level of quality commensurate with their respective organizations” (CHEA, 2002, p. 9).

Distance education is challenging the privileges enjoyed by faculty (e.g., shared governance, collegiality, and the intellectual authority of faculty), which is occurring through the dispersion of students and faculty, as well as the rise of part-time faculty, standardized courses, commercialized software, and the unbundling of faculty responsibilities (Eaton, 2000). Whereas faculty have traditionally been responsible for the design and delivery of their instruction, different parties now often perform these tasks. As more part-time instructors are hired, the predominance of tenured faculty further diminishes. Professors are taking issue with the manner in which distance learning is being administered, “since distance learning classes are often assigned as an additional part of the load without extra compensation or credit” (Bloland, 2001, p. 193). Some scholars have also noticed the tendency of quality reviews for distance education to be conducted by administrators instead of faculty, which has the implication that quality assurance could “become driven by external criteria rather than internal peer review, and quality assurance might be more likely to rely on the standards of the market as opposed to those of academia” (Bloland, 2001, p. 192).

Distance education challenges accreditation because of its expanded emphasis on training and certificate programs, rather than traditional degree offerings (CHEA, 2002). By facilitating the rapid growth of innovative degree providers, distance education challenges the supremacy that traditional colleges and universities have held in degree granting (Eaton, 2000). As more students ask for training that provides credentials and skills directly applicable to their jobs, general education and degrees can become marginalized in institutions. In response to these threats, some critics of distance education contend that this mode of delivery is more commercial than educational in character (Bloland, 2001). To address the market pressures, a salient question for accreditation today is whether accreditors should “further expand their attention to include assuring the quality of independent and discrete learning activities focused on training” (CHEA, 2002, p. 9).

Training initiatives and distance education also threaten the standardized unit of instruction in higher education, the credit hour. Learning can be measured in credit units, clock hours, or continuing education units, but the relative importance of delineating the differences among these measurements is weakening (Wellman, 2003). One regional accreditor, the North Central Commission on Higher Education, has developed a recent policy which suggests it “is less interested in measuring conventional, institution-based measures of time and location as criteria for student credit than in knowing that decisions about what constitutes academic credit are made by the faculty” (Wellman, 2003, p. 61-62). Wellman also notes that regional accreditors “provide more details about what might be called alternative routes for the awarding of academic credit, such as the

acceptance of transfer credits, credit by examination, portfolio assessment of student learning, and residency requirements for degrees” (p. 66).

Similar to the threat posed to traditional degrees and credit hours, the emphasis on training and professional studies challenges the general education requirements typical in an undergraduate program. To counter such trends, the regional accrediting organizations have insisted that “programs leading to an undergraduate degree include general education requirements” (CHEA, 2002, p. 10).

#### Meeting the Challenges and Capitalizing on Distance Education Opportunities

Despite the challenges to accreditation posed by distance education, higher education administrators should not dismiss this form of instructional delivery as too burdensome or unnecessary. Concerns that distance education doesn’t match traditional methods should be tempered by the same wisdom that has led higher education to expand beyond the classical education into studies such as multiculturalism and numerous professional fields. With its inherent flexibility, distance education can be the means whereby millions of students, hampered by constraints of distance, time, money, family responsibilities, and work can receive an education. Distance education capitalizes on the technologies that are constantly becoming more efficient and effective, and helps students develop proficiencies in these technologies that they can use in the workplace.

For each of the challenges posed by distance education, transitional strategies can be employed to balance traditional values in higher education with the conditions of online learning (Eaton, 2000). These strategies suggested by Eaton include strategic coupling, electronic participation for greater collegiality, redefining faculty authority, demarcating the roles of degrees and credentials, advocating general education, and

identifying the added value of place. As one example, to maintain institutional autonomy when entering into consortia, universities should try to collaborate with institutions most like themselves in order to maintain their values and standards of quality. To preserve the values of collegiality and faculty authority, electronic forums and listservs can be used to encourage greater discussion and cohesion among professors and other teachers. If faculty feel threatened by the unbundling of their roles, they can develop their own distance education courses or establish their own standards for online classes. To ensure that site-based education, general education, and the degree system continue to be valued, faculty need to better articulate the benefits of each, and determine how symbiotic relationships can be formed with distance education, professionally-focused education and training, and certificates. All of these efforts can be guided by the assumption that it is more important to maintain the *purpose* of core values, rather than the *form* that embodies them (Eaton, 2000). In other words, educators should initially focus the “whys” in these areas, rather than the “hows.”

The disequilibria in higher education spawning from distance education offer “an opportunity for both institutions and accreditors to rethink accepted values, their relationship to the achievement of quality, and their role in accreditation” (Eaton, 2000, p. 1). In other words, the phrase “that’s the way we’ve always done it, and that’s the way it works best” is losing its hegemony. In the last decade, accrediting bodies have given much more attention to students’ learning outcomes, compared to standards in previous years that focused more on available resources and institutional qualifications. Although the heightened emphasis on learning outcomes has been more recent, this focus is not new; for example, Marcus (1983) cites research from the 1960s and 1970s which

concluded that “accreditation is not on the mark if it does not include student achievement or outcomes as a major indicator of institutional quality” (p. 21).

Distance education providers are increasingly being asked to demonstrate that their “student retention rates, student satisfaction, faculty satisfaction, [and] measures of student competence in both general skills (communication, comprehension, analysis, etc.) and skills specific to the field of study” are comparable to results in traditional education (CHEA, 2002, p. 13). As one illustration of the importance of these results, such outcomes “became an issue of contention between many of the for-profit institutions and the Department of Education in the late 1980s and 1990s, when rising default rates on student loans and institutional closures caused concern about institutional integrity in the sector” (Wellman, 2003, p. 64). The prevalence of higher dropout rates have been a constant criticism of distance education, although an evaluation of the retention data, methods of evaluation, and causes of lower retention make for imprecise generalizations (Howell, Laws, & Lindsay, in press). To improve student achievement and retention, distance educators should work to ensure greater student-faculty contact, student collaboration, and adequate student support and learning resources (Eaton, 2002).

Accreditors require colleges and universities to compare students’ achievements to their own mission and goals, which many deem more profitable than comparisons between institutions. One such advocate is Millard (1994), who describes this contextual definition of quality as “achievement in kind” and argues it is the most appropriate measure of educational effectiveness (p. 159). Comparisons regularly occur *within* institutions, however, as educators contrast distance education students to those in traditional classrooms. Such comparisons can be problematic though for reasons such as

differing demographics, educational goals, and available funding for sustained learning. Another difficulty stems from the multiple forms of “traditional” education, which can refer to lectures, discussions, or other active learning approaches that can vary significantly in their effectiveness. Thus, it is hard to compare traditional to distance education when both of them encompass numerous approaches and media.

Although comparisons between delivery modes on student learning outcomes can unfairly characterize distance education (and sometimes traditional learning as well), comparisons will obviously be made, and both types of instruction have their benefits. In traditional classrooms, teachers have the advantage of observing their students’ non-verbal behavior, allowing them to adapt their teaching as necessary. In contrast, the electronic delivery utilized in distance education can collect concrete data more easily than methods possible in traditional classrooms, one example being regular student feedback gathered through online evaluations. Computer-based tests are usually automated, saving instructors’ time for instructional activities other than grading, and such tests have the advantages of providing quicker feedback to students and allowing for computer-adaptive testing (Erwin & Wise, 2002). In addition, computer-based tests can employ multimedia objects with visual and audio components that facilitate “the presentation of tasks that are more like those actually encountered in academic and work settings” (Shermis & Daniels, 2002, p. 153). For example, in a physical science class where students are being tested on principles of motion and gravity, an interactive example created electronically can be more meaningful than a paper and pencil test. This is especially true if testing is viewed as a form of teaching and not just assessment.

Since almost all records, communication, and measures of assessment in distance education are recorded electronically, it is easier for accreditors and educational researchers to access and manipulate this information than it is to do so in traditional classrooms where such information is not concretized. The effectiveness of distance education evaluations continues to increase as “accreditors rely on a growing cadre of faculty and academic administrators who have specialized in these alternative designs,” and as they “include these individuals on visiting teams to institutions undergoing an accreditation review and as consultants to the development of standards” (CHEA, 2002, p. 14). The burgeoning research and other scholarly work of such professionals dedicated to distance education provides further legitimacy to this field, continually making it more mainstream in higher education.

#### Conclusion

As the references and analysis in this paper suggest, accreditation for distance education is necessary for “evaluating educational quality, assuring institutional accountability, achieving and maintaining high standards, [and] making education more responsive to students’ and society’s needs” (Young et al., 1983, p. ix). There are many areas where distance learning should be used and measured similarly to traditional learning, and other areas where distance learning requires its own conditions. These two contrasting approaches can be balanced by transitional strategies (e.g., electronic communities of faculty, the strategic coupling of institutions) that preserve traditional values and accommodate distance-learning needs, focusing more on purpose than form (Eaton, 2000). Bates (2000) proposes that the biggest challenge for institutions utilizing distance education may be “the lack of vision and the failure to use technology

strategically” (p. 7). In other words, the opportunities available through distance education should not be passed by in attempts to make distance education the same as traditional education. The two modes of delivery can be different, but equal.

As administrators and scholars review the challenges posed by distance education, they should realize that distance education should be “considered in the context of other changes affecting higher education, such as the growing role of market considerations and increased accountability pressures from the government and the public” (Eaton, 2000, p. 2). In other words, distance education is not growing in isolation, and a consideration of societal forces and needs that have accompanied its rise should help university and college leaders determine the proper role of distance education in their institutions. Accreditors need to address the question of “whether there is an unbridgeable gap between the values of for-profit enterprises and those of nonprofit institutions when it comes to providing education” (Eaton, 2001, p. 8).

Accreditation is one (and perhaps the primary) means of quality control that can help providers of distance education realize their potential in helping students maximize the benefits generated by this mode of delivery and learning. Despite the challenges to accreditation initiated by distance education, distance education experts feel that accrediting bodies “are well positioned to handle continued growth in distance learning,” and can balance the demands of large enrollments and necessary standards (CHEA, 2002, p. 15). The guidelines established by the regional and national accrediting bodies will doubtless change from year to year as technology improves and better instructional strategies are developed. The next decades should be a time of fluidity and transformation, much like the last ten years have been since the advent of online learning.

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