Accreditation and Assuring Quality in Distance Learning

Council for Higher Education Accreditation

CHEA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report describes the scope and impact of distance learning on higher education today. It identifies the primary challenges that distance learning poses for accreditation and describes the thoughtful and comprehensive response to date of the accrediting community to assure quality in distance learning. Among its findings:

- 5,655 institutions are accredited by the 17 institutional accreditors (regional and national).

- 1,979 of these institutions offer a form of distance-delivered learning programs or courses, some of which lead to degree acquisition.

- Standards, guidelines, and polices to determine academic quality are in place for the scrutiny of distance learning. The 17 institutional accreditors who review institutions offering distance learning programs or courses actively apply these standards or guidelines in their reviews. Where appropriate, accreditors have modified and expanded their practices to address unique features of distance learning.

Assuring quality in distance learning presents three major challenges to accreditation:

- **Alternative Design of Instruction.** What must accreditors do to assure that these alternative designs sustain a level of quality commensurate with the standards of their respective organizations?

- **Alternative Providers of Higher Education.** What must accreditors do to assure that these providers sustain a level of quality commensurate with the standards of their respective organizations?

- **Expanded Focus on Training.** Should accreditors further expand their attention to include assuring the quality of independent and discrete learning activities focused on training?

Regional and national accrediting organizations are addressing distance learning and these major challenges directly:

- **Alternative Design of Instruction.** Accrediting organizations examine those distance learning offerings with alternative designs of instruction with a particular focus on key areas of institutional activity essential to quality: curriculum and instruction, faculty support, student support, and student learning outcomes.

- **Alternative Providers of Higher Education.** Accrediting organizations scrutinize new providers in a manner that parallels the scrutiny of site-based institutions and programs. This examination is based on each of the seven key areas of institutional activity discussed in this report: institutional mission, institutional organizational structure, institutional resources, curriculum and instruction, faculty support, student support, and student learning outcomes. At the same time, accreditors isolate unique features of the distance learning environment for particular scrutiny.

- **Expanded Focus on Training.** Accreditors may make use of the platform of the eight regional accrediting organizations and the standards of the nine national accrediting organizations to focus on the expanding universe of discrete training activities offered apart from longer-term, structured offerings such as degree programs.

Accreditation and Assuring Quality in Distance Learning

INTRODUCTION

ACCREDITATION IS A PROCESS OF EXTERNAL PEER REVIEW OF THE QUALITY OF HIGHER education institutions and programs. More than 100 years old, accreditation is also a response to concerns about protecting public health and safety and serving the public interest.

U.S. accreditation is an extensive enterprise. In 2001, 80 accrediting organizations accredited approximately 6,350 institutions and 17,500 programs.[1] The federal government has relied on accreditation for the past 50 years for decisions about eligibility of higher education institutions to receive federal student financial assistance and other federal funds.

Accreditation has reviewed learning at a distance since the establishment of correspondence schools more than a century ago. Today, "distance learning" has expanded greatly and now refers to any educational or instructional activity in which students are separated from faculty and other students. This may include, in addition to correspondence instruction, synchronous or asynchronous learning environments with a variety of instructional modes, e.g., audio or computer conferencing, computer-mediated instruction, Internet-based instruction, videocassettes or disks, or television. The growth of distance learning offerings in accredited higher education institutions during the last 10 years is not surprising given the growth of the Internet and "e-commerce" during the same period.

This report describes the scope and impact of distance learning on higher education today. It identifies the primary challenges that distance learning poses for accreditation. Most important, it describes the thoughtful and comprehensive response to date of the accrediting community to assure quality in distance learning. The report examines the 17 institutional accreditors that are recognized by either the United States Department of Education (USDE) or the Council for

> Accreditation examines and makes a judgment about how the fundamental features of an institution's operation that are important to quality are affected by distance learning challenges. These features are institutional mission, organization, resources of the institution, curriculum and instruction, faculty support, student support, and student learning outcomes. Accreditation undertakes this examination, in some cases, based on new standards and processes that have been developed specifically to assure the quality of distance learning. In other cases, accreditors have modified existing standards or processes to achieve the same goal. Through these changes, accreditors assure the quality of alternative designs of instruction, alternative providers, and the expanded focus on training.

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[1] 2001 CHEA *Almanac of External Quality Review*, Council for Higher Education Accreditation, Washington, D.C. This report focuses on distance learning in institutions and does not examine the 17,500 programs noted above. Specialized accreditors accredit degree and certificate programs in specific program areas within institutions. Some also accredit freestanding institutions dedicated to a particular profession.

Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA).[2] These organizations all review distance learning. They fall into two categories: "regional" accreditors (8) that review primarily nonprofit, degree-granting institutions and "national" accreditors (9) that review primarily for-profit degree or nondegree-granting institutions or faith-based institutions.[3]

Assuring quality in distance learning presents three major challenges for accreditation:

- **Alternative Design of Instruction.** Distance learning offerings frequently call for a design of instruction that is different from the traditional classroom-based learning environment. What must accreditors do to assure that these alternative designs sustain a level of quality commensurate with the standards of their respective organizations?

- **Alternative Providers of Higher Education.** Distance learning is offered not only by traditional institutions, but also by new online degree-granting institutions as well as degree-granting and nondegree-granting online consortia of institutions and corporate universities. These institutions seek accreditation. What must accreditors do to assure that these providers sustain a level of quality commensurate with the standards of their respective organizations?

- **Expanded Focus on Training.** Distance learning is a favored instructional mode especially for ongoing training in professional fields, whether offered by higher education institutions, corporations, or other organizations. The emphasis is on a discrete set of learning activities usually designed to provide immediate acquisition of skills and knowledge over a relatively short period of time. These activities are often independent of longer-term, more structured offerings such as degree programs. Should accreditors—focused mainly on institutions and programs of considerably longer duration—further expand their attention to include assuring the quality of these discrete learning activities?

The core of the accrediting community's response to the challenges of distance learning may be summarized as follows:

Accreditation examines and makes a judgment about how the fundamental features of an institution's operation that are important to quality are affected by these challenges. These

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[2] Recognition is a status achieved by accrediting organizations that have undergone a review of their quality and have been found to meet the criteria for recognition promulgated either by USDE or CHEA, a private organization that coordinates regional, national, and specialized accreditation.

[3] The eight regional institutional accrediting organizations are the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Higher Education, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Technical and Career Institutions, the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools The Higher Learning Commission, the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Colleges and Universities, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, and the Western Association of Schools and Colleges Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities. The nine national institutional accrediting organizations are the Accrediting Association of Bible Colleges Commission on Accreditation, the Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools, the Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges of Technology, the Accrediting Commission of the Distance Education and Training Council, the Accrediting Council for Continuing Education and Training, the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools, the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada Commission on Accrediting, the Council on Occupational Education, and the Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools Accrediting Commission.

features are institutional mission, organization, resources of the institution, curriculum and instruction, faculty support, student support, and student learning out comes. Accreditation undertakes this examination, in some cases, based on new standards and processes that have been developed specifically to assure the quality of distance learning. In other cases, accreditors have modified existing standards or processes to achieve the same goal. Through these changes, accreditors assure the quality of alternative designs of instruction, alternative providers, and the expanded focus on training.

This is not the first time that the accrediting community has faced the challenges of significant change in higher education design, providers, and focus. In the last century, both higher education enrollments and the numbers of institutions expanded dramatically. The types of institutions diversified, especially with the emergence of community colleges. Higher education sustained an enormous growth of part-time nondegree students, developed extensive international programming, and created diverse partnership and consortia arrangements. In these instances, as higher education changed, so, too, accreditation changed to continue to assure the quality of the education provided. The situation is the same for distance learning.

> **5,655 INSTITUTIONS ARE ACCREDITED BY THE 17 INSTITUTIONAL ACCREDITORS INCLUDED IN THE CHEA REVIEW**
>
> - 3,077 (54%) are regionally accredited
> - 2,578 (46%) are nationally accredited
>
> **THE MAJORITY OF ACCREDITED INSTITUTIONS THAT OFFER DISTANCE LEARNING ARE REGIONALLY ACCREDITED:**
>
> - 1,979 institutions offer distance learning
> - 1,708 or 86% are regionally accredited
> - 271 or 14% are nationally accredited

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT DISTANCE LEARNING TODAY?

A national review of distance education has not been undertaken since a USDE survey in 1999[4]. However, in December 2001-January 2002 CHEA collected data from the eight regional and nine national recognized institutional accrediting organizations to obtain information about distance learning in their accredited institutions. These 17 organizations reported that they accredit 5,655 degree-granting and nondegree-granting postsecondary institutions in the United States.[5] These data help to answer:

- **Where does distance learning occur today and what type of accreditation do these sources of distance learning sustain?**

- **How many students are enrolled in accredited institutions?**

- **What is the distribution of federal financial aid by type of institution?**

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[4] *Distance Education at Postsecondary Institutions 1997-98*, United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics Report NCES 2000-013, December 1999. "Distance education," as used in the USDE report is defined as courses delivered to remote (off-campus) locations via audio, video (live or prerecorded), or computer technologies, including both synchronous and asynchronous instruction.

[5] The number of institutions reported by the 17 institutional accreditors in 2001-2002 (5,655) does not include institutions from two national accreditors, the Association of Advanced Rabbinical and Talmudic Schools and the National Accrediting Commission of Cosmetology Arts and Sciences, because they do not offer distance learning programs. These institutions are reflected in the total count of 6,350 on page 1.

Where does distance learning occur today and what type of accreditation do these sources of distance learning sustain?

Most distance learning at the postsecondary level today is occurring at degree-granting colleges and universities accredited by one of the eight regional accrediting organizations.

Of the 5,655 accredited institutions, 3,077 are accredited by regional organizations and 2,578 by national organizations. 1,979 of these accredited institutions offer a form of distance-delivered programs and courses, some of which lead to degree acquisition. Of the 1,979 institutions, 1,708 are regionally accredited and 271 are nationally accredited.

The charts on pages 5 and 6 describe the number of accredited institutions and the number of accredited institutions that offer distance learning as reported to CHEA in the December 2001-January 2002 survey.

How many students are enrolled in accredited institutions?

The 5,655 accredited institutions enrolled 16,144,697 students in 2001*. Eighty-eight (88) percent of students (14,261,537) attending colleges and universities are enrolled in institutions accredited by one of the eight regional organizations.[6]

What is the distribution of federal financial aid by type of institution?

According to USDE, the largest concentration of student aid dollars is to be found in public and private two- and four-year institutions that are nonprofit. These institutions are most likely to hold accredited status from one of the eight regional accrediting organizations. Approximately 98 percent of institutions that were regionally accredited in 2001 were nonprofit as compared to approximately 27 percent of the institutions that were nationally accredited (CHEA internal data).

Of the $49.3 billion dollars in student aid distributed in 1999-2000, $39.3 billion is in the

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Distribution of Title IV Student Financial Aid Program Funds by Institutional Sector, 1999-2000

(dollars in millions)

	Undergraduate	Graduate/ Professional	Total
Public Four-year	$14,298.4	$ 4,162.3	$18,460.8
Public Two –year	5,222.7		5,222.7
Private Four-year	9,491.1	5,766.0	15,257.1
Private Two-year	379.4		379.4
Proprietary	4,269.0	364.0	4,633.1
Total	$33,660.6	$10,292.4	$43,953.0

Includes Pell, Campus-based, Federal Family Education Loans (FFEL) and Direct Loans, FFEL and Direct Loans include Stafford, unsubsidized Stafford and PLUS loans.
Source: National Center for Education Statistics, National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey: 2000 Undergraduate Students 10/12/01

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* COE reported full-time enrollments; their count of 343,195 is not reflected in the total number of students. Data are from national accrediting organizations responding to the CHEA December 2001–January 2002 survey.

[6] 2001 CHEA *Almanac of External Quality Review*, Council for Higher Education Accreditation, Washington, DC

nonprofit sector while $4.6 billion is in the for-profit sector. This picture, while informative about the total distribution of student aid, masks the importance of student aid to individual for-profit institutions and their students. 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. Greater proportions of proprietary school students receive financial aid.
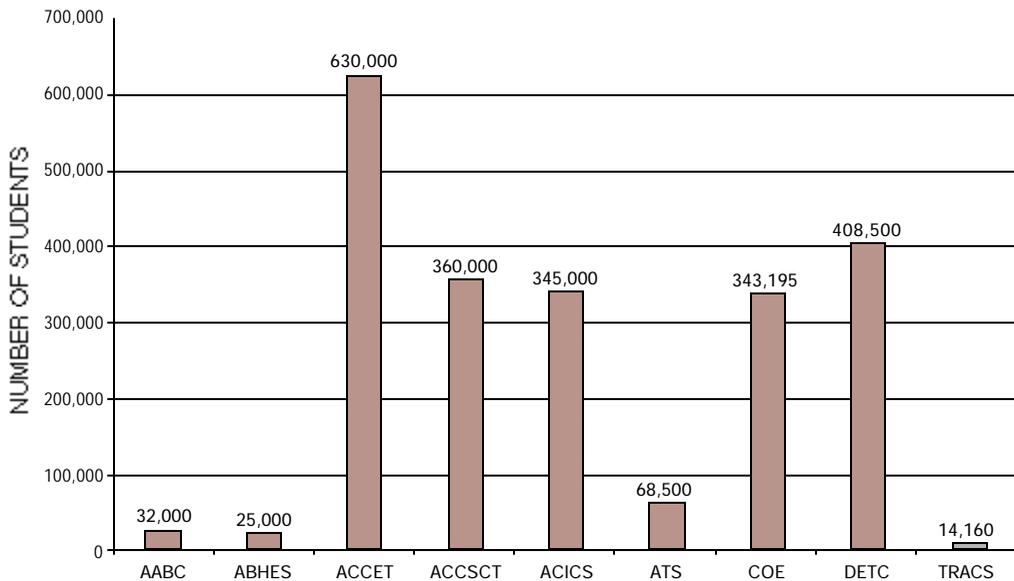
THE CHEA review and USDE financial aid data make it clear that, at least to date, distance learning offerings, student enrollments, and student financial aid is concentrated in regionally accredited institutions.

CHART 1: Distance Learning at Institutions Accredited by Regional Accrediting Organizations*

* Data from regional accrediting organizations responding to the CHEA December 2001–January 2002 survey. NEASC-CIHE and WASC-ACSCU report only the number of their institutions that offer at least 50 percent or more of a degree program through technologically mediated instruction but acknowledge that considerably more of their institutions offer some distance learning.

CHART 2: Distance Learning at Institutions Accredited by National Accrediting Organizations*

* Data from national accrediting organizations responding to the CHEA December 2001–January 2002 survey.

CHART 3: Number of Students Enrolled at Institutions Accredited by Regional Accrediting Organizations*
TOTAL NUMBER OF STUDENTS=14,261,537

NUMBER OF STUDENTS

Organization	Number of Students
MSA	2,413,873
NEASC-CIHE	590,000
NEASC-CTCI	140,000
NCA	4,667,022
NWA	975,872
SACS	3,496,634
WASC-ACCJC	1,324,638
WASC-ACSCU	653,498
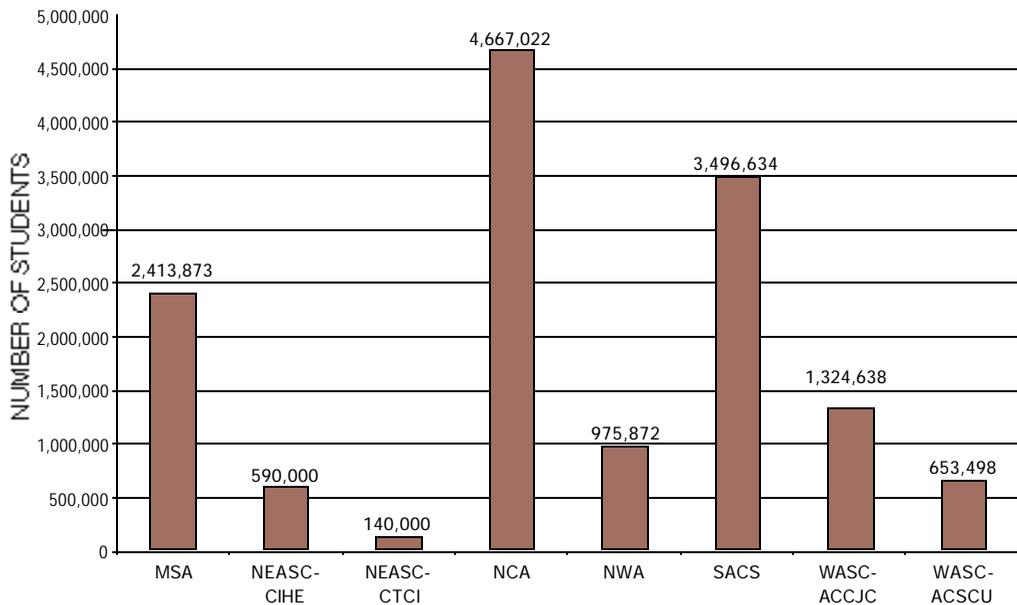
CHART 4: Number of Students Enrolled at Institutions Accredited by National Accrediting Organizations*
TOTAL NUMBER OF STUDENTS=1,883,160**

NUMBER OF STUDENTS

Organization	Number of Students
AABC	32,000
ABHES	25,000
ACCET	630,000
ACCSCT	360,000
ACICS	345,000
ATS	68,500
COE	343,195
DETC	408,500
TRACS	14,160

* The 2001 CHEA *Almanac of External Quality Review*, Council for Higher Education Accreditation, Washington D.C.
** COE reported full-time enrollments; their count of 343,195 is not reflected in the total number of students.

COUNCIL FOR HIGHER EDUCATION ACCREDITATION

WHAT IS ACCREDITATION DOING TO ASSURE QUALITY IN DISTANCE LEARNING?

Regardless of the sector in which distance learning is occurring, the nine national accrediting organizations and the eight regional accrediting organizations have responded to the challenges that distance learning presents by making significant changes to their accreditation standards, policies, or procedures.

The eight regional accrediting organizations have adopted a common platform for review of distance learning.[7] The platform serves as a basis for common understanding among the regional accreditors of those elements that support quality in distance learning. The platform informs and supports the distance learning policies and processes in each region.

The best practices in distance learning that are the key planks of this platform enable regional accreditors to isolate the distinctive features of distance learning offerings and to examine their quality. These best practices focus on seven fundamental features of institutional operation important to assuring quality in distance learning.

The nine national accrediting organizations have independently developed standards, policies, or processes for the evaluation of distance learning. Some of these take the form of new standards, while others are addenda to existing standards or additional criteria to be applied to existing standards. These standards, too, focus on seven fundamental features of institutional operations important to assuring quality in distance learning.

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 institution?

■ 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 faculty competent 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?

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[7] *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,* 2001. Available from the Websites of the regional accrediting organizations. Please see p. 16.

The following examples of standards demonstrate how accreditors have adapted to the changing environment and made appropriate changes to accommodate distance education.[8]

Institutional Mission

In the distance learning environment, accrediting organizations focus on the relevance of the distance learning programs and courses to the institution's mission.

"In its content, purposes, organization, and enrollment history, the program must be consistent with the institution's role and mission."   (Regional Accrediting Organizations)

"Distance learning programs must be consistent with the institution's mission and limited to those subject areas for which the institution has expertise."   (AABC)

"The curriculum of the distance learning program must be consistent with the mission and educational objectives of the institution."   (ABHES)

Accreditors also focus on demonstration of need for a distance learning offering in relation to institutional mission:

*"The reasons for offering the distance learning education and training must be consistent with the institution's mission and documented by a market needs assessment or market experience."
(ACCET)*

"The purpose of the distance learning program must be appropriate to the institution's stated purpose and educational goals, appropriate for students, and appropriate in the context being served. There must be documented evidence of need for the distance learning program."   (ATS)

"There must be a documented need for the distance learning program, and the program must be within the purpose or mission of the institution."   (TRACS)

Institutional Organizational Structure

Accreditors generally provide institutions with considerable flexibility in establishing structures that meet an institution's particular needs when developing distance learning initiatives. All require effective planning and evaluation systems and appropriate administrative structures that allow the institution to achieve its distance learning goals.

*"Any distance learning programs offered by an institution must be appropriately integrated into the institution's administrative structures, as well as its planning and oversight mechanisms. Institutional evaluation of electronically offered programs must take place in the context of the institution's regular evaluation of all academic programs."
(Regional Accrediting Organizations)*

"Distance education programs must have appropriate structures and administrative procedures. The administration of such programs must be fully integrated into the institution's regular policies and procedures. The collegial aspects of shared governance, including initiation, review, approval,

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[8] All examples listed are taken from accrediting organization reference documents. For a complete list of these documents, explanations of acronyms, and Website addresses, please see pages 16–19.

implementation, and evaluation must be followed."   (ATS)

"All distance learning programs must be approved and administered under established institutional policies and procedures, and supervised by an administrator who is part of the institutional organization. There must be appropriate involvement of on-campus administrators and faculty in planning, approval, and ongoing evaluation."   (COE)

Institutional structures for distance learning may vary significantly based on interest in subcontracting or entering into other arrangements for delivery of distance learning rather than the institution itself providing distance learning.

"When an institution contracts for educational services, it must remain responsible for academic quality and integrity of the program."   (ATS)

"The institution must retain responsibility for the quality of the distance learning programs and courses and the achievement of expected and acceptable outcomes, irrespective of any contractual arrangements, partnerships, or consortia."   (ACCSCT)

Institutional Resources

Accrediting organizations also address an institution's financial capacity to provide an educational program that meets generally accepted norms for quality.

"The institution's budgets and policy statements must reflect its commitment to the students for whom the electronically offered programs are designed. The institution must assure adequacy of technical and physical plant facilities, including appropriate staffing and technical assistance, to support its electronically delivered programs."   (Regional Accrediting Organizations)

"Distance learning programs must not adversely affect the institution's administrative effectiveness, result in faculty overload, or cause financial stress or instability."   (AABC)

■ Alternative Design of Instruction. What must accreditors do to assure that these alternative designs sustain a level of quality commensurate with the standards of their respective organizations?

■ Alternative Providers of Higher Education. What must accreditors do to assure that these providers sustain a level of quality commensurate with the standards of their respective organizations?

■ Expanded Focus on Training. Should accreditors further expand their attention to include assuring the quality of independent and discrete learning activities focused on training?

"The institution must have a well-defined budget and financial plan that provide for necessary and appropriate equipment, regular faculty training, and other resources essential to the continued effectiveness of the distance learning program. This plan must include frequent technological updates. The institution must provide the equipment and technical expertise to maintain a quality distance learning program."   (ABHES)

Curriculum and Instruction

Accrediting organization standards related to curriculum and instruction vary considerably because of the different types of institutions they accredit and the diverse credentials (degree or certificate) the institutions award. Certain common features do prevail, however. The standards address the content of the curriculum, the structure of the credential awarded, and the institution's process for reviewing and updating the curriculum. This includes appropriate academic

support for the educational programs of the institution, including library and learning resources.

> *"The institution must assure that each distance learning program results in collegiate-level learning outcomes appropriate to the rigor and breadth of the degree of certificate awarded by the institution, that the program is coherent and complete, and that such programs leading to an undergraduate degree include general education requirements."* (Regional Accrediting Organizations)

> *"Distance learning programs must be limited to those subject areas for which the parent institution has expertise. For-credit courses must be applicable toward one of the institution's degree programs and must be commensurate in quality with regular on-campus offerings."* (AABC)

> *"All programs must be consistent with those offered on campus."* (COE)

> *"The content of the courses must be the same as on-campus programs. The credit must be the same. The extent and quality of the academic work required to complete the program must be the same as for on-campus programs. Course requirements must be consistent with the national norm for comparable degrees in higher education...."* (TRACS)

The appropriateness of the subject matter for delivery at a distance is also a focus of accreditation attention.

> *"The curricular content and learning experiences must be structured in a form appropriate for distance learning and commensurate with institution-wide standards. They must provide consistent quality education and training and a coherent framework for students. The structure must be demonstrated to be well suited to the technology selected to deliver the course."* (ACCET)

> *"The distance learning courses and programs must have educational learning objectives and outcomes that are consistent with the program objectives and the credential awarded. The delivery method must be appropriate for the students and the curriculum."* (ACICS)

> *"The objectives of the [distance learning program] must be ...of such a nature that they can be achieved through distance study."* (DETC)

Academic support that is essential to the distance learning environment is also addressed accreditation review. This includes the technology and methodology the institution uses to deliver the instruction.

> *"The selection of technologies must be based on appropriateness for the students and for the curriculum."* (Regional Accreditors)

> *"The technology used by the institution must be current and appropriate to the course objectives."* (ABHES)

> *"The instructional methodology must be consistent with stated outcomes and appropriate for the courses. The importance of appropriate interaction (synchronous and asynchronous) between instructor and students and among students must be reflected in the design of the program."* (ACCET)

Faculty Support

In a distance learning environment, faculty support includes technological support for delivery of distance learning offerings. Appropriate training for faculty in technology is also important.

"The institution must provide 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." (Regional Accrediting Organizations)

"Instructors who teach at a distance must be appropriately oriented and trained in the effective use of technology to ensure a high level of student motivation and quality of instruction." (ACCET)

"The faculty must be adequately trained to instruct in a distance learning environment. The faculty must be supported with the appropriate educational resources and technology to instruct using the distance education method of delivery." (ACICS)

Faculty capacity to teach in a distance learning environment is essential as well.

"The institution must employ academically and experientially credentialed faculty to oversee instruction, evaluation, and grading requirements of distance education programs and courses. The institution must employ faculty who possess the technical skills to teach in a distance learning environment." (ACICS)

"The institution must employ faculty who have the qualifications and experience to teach using distance learning methods. The qualifications, credentials, and experience of such faculty to provide instruction in the subject matter of distance learning program or courses must be comparable to those of faculty teaching programs or courses with similar subject matter in traditional settings." (ACCSCT)

"The institution must have a sufficient number of qualified instructors to give individualized instructional service to each student." (DETC)

Student Support

Accrediting organizations require adequate and appropriate support for the students served by the institution in a distance learning environment. This includes a major emphasis on technical support.

"Any distance learning programs offered by an institution must provide students with reasonable technical support and full disclosure of all program requirements, including any that cannot be completed via distance learning." (Regional Accrediting Organizations)

"Institutions must assess whether students have the skills and competencies to succeed in a distance learning environment. Proper training and support must be provided. The technology chosen must support and enhance the program's goals and objectives." (MSA)

Student interaction with faculty is central to the quality of distance learning. This includes developing a sense of community in the distance learning environment.

> *"The design of the program must develop a sense of community through study groups and other activities, notice on on-campus activities, etc."* *(Regional Accrediting Organizations)*

> *"The courses and programs of study must provide for timely and meaningful interaction between instructor and student and among students."* *(ACCSCT)*

> *"There must be timely and meaningful interaction among faculty and students."* *(COE)*

> *"Programs must provide for timely and appropriate interaction between students and faculty and among students."* *(NCA, SACS)*

Other student support in a distance learning environment generally addressed by institutional accreditors includes admissions requirements, recruitment, and advertising.

> *"Admissions standards must be the same for all students."* *(AABC)*

> *"Admissions policies, procedures, and practices must fully and clearly represent the conditions and requirements related to distance learning."* *(ACCET)*

There are additional considerations related to the admission of students to a distance learning environment.

> *"The institution must assess through counseling during the admissions process whether the student has the self-motivation and commitment to benefit from a distance learning program. All students admitted to the program must possess the basic technological knowledge and ability to use the equipment. The institution must provide assistance to students who may experience difficulty using the technology and equipment."* *(ABHES)*

> *"The institution must assess whether students have the skills and competencies to succeed in a distance learning environment prior to enrollment. Students admitted to a distance learning program must satisfy all requirements for admissions to the institution."* *(ACCSCT)*

> *"The institution must assess student capability to succeed in distance education programs and must apply this information to admissions and recruitment policies and decisions."*
> *(NCA, SACS)*

Verification of student work takes on added significance in a distance learning environment.

> *"When examinations are given, they must take place under circumstances that include firm student identification. The institution must seek to assure the integrity of student work."*
> *(Regional Accreditors)*

> *"The institution must ensure the integrity of student work and the credibility of the degrees and credits it awards."* *(NCA, SACS)*

Student Learning Outcomes

One of the most significant changes in accreditation in the last ten years has been the increased attention accrediting organizations have been giving to student learning outcomes. Where once accreditation focused almost exclusively on educational resources and processes such as course syllabi, faculty qualifications, library holdings and physical plant, central to accreditation reviews today is evidence of student achievement.

Institutional accreditors require institutions to sustain a comprehensive system for the evaluation of the institution's educational effectiveness in relation to student learning. More important, however, is the accreditors' requirement that institutions must document, as a result of their evaluation of their effectiveness, that they are in fact meeting their educational mission and goals and that their student outcomes are at an acceptable level. This is true in the distance learning environment as well as campus-based learning.

"Documented assessment of student achievement must be conducted in each course and at the completion of the program by comparing student performance to intended learning outcomes. Institutions must assess student achievement in the distance learning programs using such measures as student retention rates, student satisfaction, faculty satisfaction, measures of student competence in both general skills (communication, comprehension, analysis, etc.) and skills specific to the field of study. Students completing distance learning courses must have sufficient opportunity to acquire comparable levels of knowledge and competencies as in similar programs or courses offered in more traditional ways." **(Regional Accrediting Organizations)**

"Observable, measurable, and achievable student performance outcomes must be identified so that distance learning programs and courses can be compared to courses and programs with similar subject matter and objectives, whether delivered by distance education methods or traditional means. The institution must specify the expected knowledge, skills, and competency levels that students will achieve in a distance learning program or course, and such must be equivalent to those expected for comparable (site-based) courses and programs. Completion, placement, and licensing exam pass rates must be assessed for the distance learning program and must be found to be comparable to site-based programs." **(ACCSCT)**

"Requirements for successful course completion must be similar to those of residential courses and programs. Assessment of student performance must demonstrate outcomes comparable to those for residential programs. The institution must document that it conducts course/program evaluations, including assessment of educational outcomes, student retention and placement, and student, faculty, and employer satisfaction." **(ACICS)**

ACCREDITATION STANDARDS AND THE THREE MAJOR CHALLENGES

As indicated in the introduction to this report, assuring quality in distance learning presents three major challenges to accreditation:

- **Alternative Design of Instruction.** What must accreditors do to assure that these alternative designs sustain a level of quality commensurate with the standards of their respective organizations?

- **Alternative Providers of Higher Education.** What must accreditors do to assure that these providers sustain a level of quality commensurate with the standards of their respective organizations?

- **Expanded Focus on Training.** Should accreditors further expand their attention to include assuring the quality of independent and discrete learning activities focused on training?

The platform of the eight regional accreditors and the standards of the nine national accreditors address these major challenges directly:

- **Alternative Design of Instruction.** Accrediting organizations examine those distance learning offerings with alternative designs of instruction with a particular focus on four of the seven key areas of institutional activity essential to quality discussed in this report: curriculum and instruction, faculty support, student support, and student learning outcomes. In addition, they affirm the availability of adequate resources to offer these alternatives. Accreditors rely on an growing cadre of faculty and academic administrators who have specialized in these alternative designs and include these individuals on visiting teams to institutions undergoing an accreditation review and as consultants to the development of standards.

- **Alternative Providers of Higher Education.** Accrediting organizations scrutinize new providers in a manner that parallels the scrutiny of site-based institutions and programs. This examination is based on each of the seven key areas of institutional activity discussed in this report: institutional mission, institutional organizational structure, institutional resources, curriculum and instruction, faculty support, student support, and student learning outcomes. At the same time, accreditors isolate unique features of the distance learning environment for particular scrutiny. If, for example, instruction is computer-mediated, accreditors look for evidence of student support that is appropriate to an instructional situation in which face-to-face contact is limited or absent. If, for example, a new provider has no physical facilities, accreditors look for access to library and other services for students and how these providers develop a community of learning.

- **Expanded Focus on Training.** Accreditors may make use the platform of the eight regional accrediting organizations and the standards of the nine national accrediting organizations to focus on the expanding universe of discrete training activities offered apart from longer-term, structured offerings such as degree programs. As with meeting the challenge of alternative designs of instruction, they would closely examine curriculum and instruction, faculty support, student support, and student learning outcomes. This challenge, however, will ultimately require accrediting organizations to consider whether they wish to formally expand the scope of their activities: to go beyond the accreditation of institutions and programs to address shorter-term offerings that may not involve any credentialing. Most institutional accreditors do not undertake reviews of training activities at this time.

CONCLUSION

Distance learning plays a significant and expanding role in education provided by accredited institutions of higher education. This is especially true in degree-granting, regionally accredited institutions where the majority of distance learning programs and courses are being offered.

Distance learning offerings are a particular challenge to accreditation in three areas: alternative design of instruction, alternative providers of higher education, and expanded focus on training. Accreditation has responded to these challenges by making significant changes in accreditation standards, policies, and procedures. These changes address the seven distinct areas of institutional activity that are of greatest significance to assuring quality in a distance learning environment: institutional mission, institutional organization, institutional resources, curriculum and instruction, faculty support, student support, and student learning outcomes. Careful examination of each in relation to distance learning offering is essential to assuring the quality of alternative designs and providers as well as the expanded focus on training.

Distance learning has grown significantly over the past several years. Accreditation is well positioned to handle continued growth in distance learning and to assure that the quality of these offerings provided by accredited institutions.

List of Acronyms and Websites

AABC   Accrediting Association of Bible Colleges, Commission on Accreditation
www.aabc.org

ABHES   Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools
www.abhes.org

ACCET   Accrediting Council for Continuing Education and Training
www.accet.org

ACCSCT   Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges of Technology
www.accsct.org

ACICS   Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools
www.acics.org

ATS   Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada, Commission on Accrediting
www.ats.edu

CHEA   Council for Higher Education Accreditation
www.chea.org

COE   Council on Occupational Education
www.council.org

DETC   Accrediting Commission of the Distance Education and Training Council
www.detc.org

MSA   Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Higher Education
www.msache.org

NCA   North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, The Higher Learning Commission
www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org

NCES   National Center for Education Statistics
www.nces.ed.gov

NEASC-CIHE   New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Commission on Institutions of Higher Education
www.neasc.org

NEASC-CTCI   New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Commission on Technical and Career Institutions
www.neasc.org

NPSAS	National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey
NWA	Northwest Association of Schools, Colleges and Universities, Commission on Colleges www.nwcuu.org
SACS	Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges www.sacscoc.org
TRACS	Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools, Accrediting Commission www.tracs.org
USDE	United States Department of Education www.ed.gov
WASC-ACCJC	Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges www.wascweb.org
WASC-ACSCU	Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities www.wascweb.org

Reference Documents for Accrediting Organization Standards

Regional Accrediting Organizations

Source Document: Statement of Commitment by the Regional Accrediting Commissions for the Evaluation of Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs, 2001. Available from the Websites of the regional accrediting organization.

Additional documents:

MSA	Policy Statement on Distance Learning, February 1997 and Guidelines for Distance Learning Programs, March 1997
NEASC-CIHE	*
NEASC-CTCI	*
NCA	Guidelines for Distance Education, Handbook of Accreditation, 2nd Edition, September 1997
NWA	*
SACS	Policy Statement on Distance Education: Definition and Principles, May 2000
WASC-AACJC	*
WASC-ACSCU	*

*No additional documents

National Accrediting Organizations

AABC	*2000 Manual*, 2000-2001
ABHES	*Accreditation Manual, 9th Edition*, Appendix J, January 2001
ACCET	*Document 3.IDL*, Interactive Distance Learning, August 2001
ACCSCT	*Standards of Accreditation*, revised 9/10/01
ACICS	*Accreditation Criteria*, July 2001 Edition, Appendix I Principles and Guidelines for Nontraditional Education
ATS	*Handbook of Accreditation*, Bulletin 44, Part 1 2000, Standards of Accreditation, also Guidelines for Petitioning the ATS Commission on Accrediting Regarding Multiple Locations (Extension Sites) and Distance Education
COE	*Handbook of Accreditation*, 2002 Edition
DETC	*Accreditation Handbook*, 2001 Edition
TRACS	*Accreditation Manual*, December 2001

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How to Reach CHEA

CHEA is pleased to provide information and assistance related to accreditation issues
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