Quality Control
in Electronic Delivery
of Higher Education

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I n 1993, when Peterson's published its first guide to higher education opportunities at a distance, it listed ninety-three institutions. In 1996, its Distance Learning guide listed 762 (www.petersons.com, Gubernick and Ebeling 1997). This rapid growth in institutions offering courses electronically is estimated to continue for several reasons. Most revolve around increased demand for education services traditionally supplied by higher-education institutions, coupled with changing expectations of students. Working adults must continually increase their skills and knowledge to keep pace in a changing job market, but are not always able to travel to a campus. They want their learning opportunities any time, any where. They expect the higher-education community to act like a service industry and provide the convenience they have come to expect from other service industries, like banking with its automated-teller machines.

Projections for most of the western states predict a radical increase in the demand for higher education from traditional-aged college students due to population increases either through international or interstate migration as well as natural increases (WICHE 1997). In a few years, these new would-be college students will compete for space in institutions that are not prepared to handle their numbers in states that cannot afford to finance new buildings to support higher education's traditional models of service delivery.

Many institutions are adding an electronic component to their service offerings so students can complete course work without traveling to the campus or use campus resources differently. In the latter case, students may meet with a faculty member face-to-face in a classroom once or twice during the term but complete all assignments electronically. Students may read texts and view pre-recorded lectures in the library, dormitory, or at home. They may communicate with their fellow students and faculty members via several electronic options (i.e., Internet, phone). However, not all campuses have yet adapted their management systems so that more students can use their limited campus facilities. For example, a

faculty member at a large, overcrowded university in California offering his on-campus class over the Internet found that the campus scheduling system still had to reserve a classroom in order to list the class. The scheduled classroom sat empty three hours a week all term while the students and their professor worked together electronically.

Few people question the quality of the learning experience when students and faculty choose to work this way inside a campus setting, but many raise questions when the same strategy is used for students off campus. There really seems to be little difference in the "learning" that is attributable to the medium, but there are some differences in the experiences of the learner and the instructor (Threlkeld and Brzoska 1994). For example, systematic investigations reveal a common event noted by faculty using electronic tools: students using asynchronous communication (i.e., e-mail, voice mail) report receiving more personalized attention from their instructors than they typically do in face-to-face classes (Markwood and Johnstone 1994). Motivated students are able to review "lecture" material as often as they choose to fully comprehend the content. Steve Ehrmann (American Association of Higher Education) and Robin Zuniga (Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications) are currently exploring these differences and developing tools to measure them through their Flashlight Project.

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Quality Control Issues for Off-Campus Programs

There is no doubt that as campuses embrace the strategy of using electronic delivery of services to students who do not travel to a campus it causes concerns for entities concerned with higher-education quality issues. Few higher-education agency or accrediting-association staff members or legislators have experienced formal learning with these tools, even though their children or grandchildren may have. It is difficult for those in charge of administering current formal and informal regulatory systems to understand how they need to change to accommodate this new environment.

Since public higher education in the United States is organized and financed by the states, all but one have higher education coordinating or governing boards, or other agencies that traditionally

had the task of maintaining some level of institutional quality control. These groups have many other roles as well, like protecting public investments in state institutions. Some states establish service areas and try to keep the institutions from engaging in unnecessary duplication of services within a state. These boards frequently see themselves as protecting consumers from poor-quality educational products and from overspending of public funds.

As higher-education services are offered via electronic media that can reach the whole state (or world), the issue of what constitutes unnecessary duplication requires new definitions. Geographic service areas must be reconsidered and may have to shift to subject-specific service areas, or specific-population service areas. Even though some states have additional criteria for licensure to operate in their state, assessing quality is usually left to the regional accrediting associations (WICHE 1994). Some of the professional licensing organizations and federal agencies also rely on regional accrediting associations to set minimal criteria for quality.

These regional accrediting associations were established about a century ago when higher-education institutions decided to develop a self-defined system of quality control. This system to ensure high quality is organized geographically, corresponding to state boundaries. Regional accrediting associations have always operated more or less autonomously; while they shared information, their own boards dictated their standards and specific procedures. For the same reasons geographic service areas are becoming irrelevant, the geographic autonomy of accrediting associations may be approaching the end of its usefulness.

At this writing, three regions are beginning the process of working together for the first time. The North Central, Northwest, and the two higher-education divisions of the Western Associations of Schools and Colleges are trying to find a common way to evaluate the western regional virtual university project known as Western Governors University (WGU). I believe the commissioners and staff members of these associations will learn a great deal about how they can, and must, begin working together in the future.

About four years ago WICHE's Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications undertook a project to bring some order into the uncoordinated efforts in this arena. The project was supported by the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education and resulted in the development of the Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Delivered Academic Programs (Smith 1996). These principles were developed as a common set of criteria which state regulators could use in evaluating out-of-state institutions wishing to serve students in their state. Their adoption by regional accrediting associations provides the common ground on which the associations are beginning their adaptation to this new region-independent environment.

These Principles of Good Practice offer only a first small step in the process by which current quality-control entities can begin the

transition they must go through to be effective. None of our traditional regulatory bodies can fully control quality in the electronic environment. No state agency can monitor telephone lines to police Internet-based courses that may be originating from an institution that has not met all its regulations. Electronic signals are blind to political boundaries. The only way to effectively protect the education consumer from less-than-good-quality distance learning is to inform that consumer. The first attempts to do so are just beginning. Peterson's published a consumers' companion book to its Distance Learning Guide and the Western Cooperative produced a pamphlet for consumers (Dixon 1996, WICHE 1997). These are just the beginning steps of consumer education and choice, the most effective quality-control mechanism.

Quality Assurance in Western Governors University

The design of Western Governors University (WGU) takes this consumer control of quality a step further. Because degrees from WGU will be competency based, the student will have complete freedom of choice regarding how she gains the skills and knowledge she needs for her credential. If a student uses WGU to find courses to help her to acquire the competencies she is seeking, she will find she has many education providers from which to choose. These providers' services will vary in price, in types of technologies employed, and in time and place demands. Some will be accredited by the traditional academic community and some will not. Some will conform more exactly to the competencies she needs to acquire; others may not fit as well. All will have been screened by WGU staff and academic advisors to be reasonable-quality learning experiences, but the student will be the ultimate decision maker regarding how well any one experience is likely to fit with her goals. She will not have to rely on the specific faculty employed at any one institution, but will be able to choose from among many.

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In determining competency, WGU will use assessments of the students' skills and knowledge which are independent from the provider offering the learning experience. However, WGU can track which learning experiences from which providers are most likely to result in successful assessments leading to a WGU degree. After a few years, this information will become part of the decision matrix

used by students as they choose which providers of higher-education services to purchase. The student/consumer will be able to make those choices with much more information than is usually available today.

Summary

The consumers of electronic higher-education services need to be more informed of what they can expect from providers before they will be able to be the primary quality-control agents. As I have noted above, this process is beginning. In the meantime, we are in a transition. Our higher-education institutions, their coordinating and governing boards, state legislators, and our federal government are all facing this transition. No one can predict what will evolve from this massive shift in the way higher-education services are being provided. The changes in the internal structures of our institutions to support these new activities will be profound and will affect all the traditional scheduling, record-keeping, and quality-control systems that were designed to serve students at a campus. The Principles of Good Practice can offer institutions focusing on internal realignment an outline for becoming "good citizens" in electronic delivery of services. However, as institutions experiment with these new ways of doing business, it is critical that regulatory agencies and policy makers recognize this transition and begin to rethink their roles as well. ▪

Notes

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About the Author

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Prior to joining the Western Cooperative in 1989, Johnstone held administrative and faculty posts at the University of Maryland University

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She recently completed the federally funded project resulting in the "Principles of Good Practice in Electronically Delivered Degree and Certificate Programs."