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Using Quality Assurance Strategies for Online Programs

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Quality assurance strategies in university distance education programs are fundamental if those initiatives are to succeed. This article organizes a quality assessment design around five components: administrative leadership and support, ongoing program concerns, course development, faculty support, and evaluation results. Each component has the potential for benchmarking progress toward an effective distance education program.

Internet technology enables universities to offer courses in an anywhere, anytime environment opening new possibilities for both students and faculty. In this new teaching modality, universities are more responsive to students' lifestyle needs, and students become more actively involved in their learning. Online technology empowers students to assume the role of lifelong learners.

Faculty gain organizational skills and more flexibility in course deliverance and administration. Instructors find themselves cast into an altered teaching environment that requires them to be facilitators who individually support their students. They report that their students in web-based courses think more critically, become involved in more indepth discussions, and interact with other students more intensely.

As institutions of higher education work toward developing online programs, it becomes more and more evident that if they are to prove effective,

quality assurance issues must be addressed. The fact of change ushers both faculty and students into the future of education, but it is the quality of change that determines if its character will be that of infinite possibilities—of progress and growth.

A report prepared for the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) by the Institute for Higher Education Policy stated that distance learning is growing rapidly, not only as a supplement to traditional institutions and programs, but also as a replacement for those institutions and programs. Furthermore, distance learning is seen by many as “transformative (sic) vehicle for increasing the pace of change and reform in higher education. For these and other reasons, analysis of quality assurance is an essential topic for national, state and institutional policy development” (p. vii). The CHEA report (1998) defines “...‘quality assurance’ in distance learning as the means by which the institutions or providers set their program goals and measure results against those goals.” (p. viii)

Recently, the Institute for Higher Education Policy (2000) prepared a report on assessing the quality of online programs. The study recommended that institutions evaluate their programs in several areas: institutional support, course development, teaching and learning, course structure, student support, faculty support, and evaluation and assessment. Their final rubric contains 24 specific benchmarking items that the authors believed provided a good domain sample for indexing the status of online programs.

The authors of this article discuss several Quality Assurance Strategies (QAS) that actualize effective online teaching and learning: administrative leadership and support, ongoing program concerns, course development, student concerns and needs, and faculty development. We structure our discussion framework on the University of Central Florida’s (UCF) teaching and learning program.

Ongoing formative and summative evaluation is the fundamental component within the UCF initiative. This research assembled data through faculty and student cohorts on cognitive, affective, and behavioral factors associated with distance learning. Evaluation becomes the “turning point” where informed judgments and bold decisions have to be made, especially when the outcomes of significant trends and their future preponderance hang in the balance.

Administrative Leadership and Support

The fundamental Quality Assurance Strategy (QAS) to support distance education for any campus, college, or department is a functional administrative, technological, and organizational infrastructure. Providing the necessary training, course delivery, and support technologies is not sufficient to make a successful virtual campus. Facilitation must take place through administrative leadership to catalyze positive changes throughout the institution. Supportive policies help instructors understand how their distance learning activities correspond to strategic university initiatives, and thus, provide a contextual base. The optimal mechanisms to support online course development and delivery include technical assistance, training, research, and funding opportunities—both internal and external.

The University of Central Florida offers web-based courses to meet the diverse needs of its growing student population. UCF's centralized approach uses a technical infrastructure design that provides administrative leadership, structures faculty development, and assesses course delivery services. Administrative leadership must facilitate distance education to catalyze a positive change throughout the institution.

The Office of Academic Affairs, through the Vice-Provost for Academic Programs, initiates service through several units. The Center for Distributed Learning (CDL) administrates interactive television, video, and online programs. CDL acts as an information clearinghouse to initiate administrative support and resolve accreditation issues created by transforming face-to-face programs to the virtual environment. The Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning (FCTL) offers a wide range of support services for faculty entering the web-based teaching environment. FCTL's centerpiece is a summer institute where faculties from across campus integrate, creating innovative teaching approaches, including online instruction. The Research Initiative for Teaching Effectiveness (RITE) is an internally funded unit that assists faculty research in effective teaching practices. Currently, one of RITE's focuses is to examine the impact of distributed learning on faculty and students teaching and enrolled in web-based courses (Sorg, et al., 1999; Hartman, Dziuban, & Moskal, 2000; Moskal & Dziuban, 2001; Dziuban, et al., in press).

Once online, instructors find teaching support via several units under the Vice Provost for Information Technologies and Resources. Course Development and Web Services (CDWS) offers centralized training and support for

faculty to develop and deliver their web-based courses in a full semester course with complete technical assistance. The Office of Instructional Resources (OIR) provides multimedia services to faculty. The Library and Computer Services also comprise administrative units that support online education.

If your university establishes an organizational infrastructure for distance education, faculty transforming face-to-face classroom courses into web-based programs should have access to support mechanisms at the university, college, and department levels. This first Quality Assurance Strategy demands then that faculty, now apprised of these available resources, take full advantage of them. Without administrative leadership and support, the assurance of quality distance programs will likely be a daunting task.

Ongoing Program Concerns and Needs

Online learning requires facilitated relationships among university constituents, as well as access to the campus infrastructure and services. Universities must structure web-based programs to maintain a high quality learning environment. Several Quality Assurance Strategies guarantee these standards.

The decision to put a program online involves discussion, planning, and evaluation at several levels. The program coordinator must present a plan that clearly and comprehensively defines the online process and the online program's direction to college and department administrators (deans, chairs, and program committees) for their support. Administrative interest points include an online delivery rationale, projected student enrollment changes, available online line support courses, a study program, recruitment strategies for program promotion, and the resources necessary for quality assurance. The program coordinator should also present a timeline for course planning, preparation, and implementation.

At the program level, needs and concerns become more specific. Program planning and development should be based on established standards and guidelines from accrediting associations as well as national and state professional organizations. Instructional designers, programmers, and technicians should facilitate course conversion based on academic standards from a face-to-face format into web-based delivery. In turn, the

program coordinator must maintain ongoing communication with accreditation agencies regarding evolving standards and guidelines.

The assessment and evaluation process is also crucial to an online program's success. During the design and development phase, the coordinator should review existing online programs and courses. Helpful assessment tools include faculty-involved consultations in the development of web-based instruction and site visits to campuses using web-based delivery.

Ongoing evaluation of individual courses as they relate to the overall program is needed to maintain curriculum continuity. Evaluation strategies that use comments from outside reviewers, student input and evaluations, current online research, and professional literature should be considered.

Web Course Development

Web course development at the University of Central Florida is a team process bringing together subject matter experts (faculty), instructional designers, web programmers, and graphic artists. Web courses, therefore, reflect not only the instructor's content choice, but also interaction, assessment, and other functional aspects.

At UCF, each online course is fully web-based, using web development software and support tools to create content pages, graphics, media, course management, and other components. Course directories store web pages, labeled by university standard course section numbers, on computer services' main distributed learning file server.

After deciding to either develop a new online course or to convert an existing face-to-face course to the online format, the instructor should next conduct a comprehensive course analysis, relative to the program, and focusing on course prerequisites, program sequencing, assessment instruments, instructional methodologies, and strategies.

Within any specific course, the instructor must consider appropriate media for conveying course content; for example, audio, motion, streaming video, and visuals (line drawings, photographs, and graphics). Communication strategies must reflect a variety of learning styles and provide diverse

instructional opportunities. Good online courses also make use of software management tools such as forum and chat.

Courses should model appropriate copyright use and strive to provide assignments and activities that reinforce these values. Research should be implemented in courses through the use of online library resources. A final strategy involves developing clearly defined learner outcomes. Students should know what they will learn and how they will be expected to demonstrate that knowledge.

Student Concerns and Needs

Distance learning initiatives should provide students with more course completion options while maintaining the academic quality of those offerings. Any student who is admitted to the university or who meets the program prerequisites should be permitted to enroll in an online course. Upon enrollment, students should be given access to the Internet and e-mail accounts. Some student resources at UCF include:

- Online course orientation (online and face-to-face),
- Library online and live tutorials,
- Pegasus connections CD-ROM (provides the necessary software to access distance learning courses, tutorials and assessments),
- CyberKnights project (orients and assists students in the use of UCF computing and network resources and provides one-on-one assistance),
- UCF Online Resource Directory, and
- WebCT orientation.

Instructors need an understanding of the components that impact the students enrolled in online courses. Did the student choose the online course over the same course in a face-to-face format? Is time management a factor because the student works full time? Is travel time a consideration? Each of these components impacts a student's motivation and attitude when choosing web-based courses.

Student/instructor communication is vital to online course success and should be established quickly. Immediate instructor contact reassures first time online students and builds confidence by demonstrating an initial

technological competence. The online interactive capability (forum, bulletin board, chat room, etc.) can serve as an “ice breaker” for the class. Such an informal, nongraded activity gives students a platform to become acquainted with each other, share concerns, offer support, and hopefully relax and enjoy the course. This strategy also assists the instructor to identify early those students that might encounter difficulties (Keller, 1983; Keller & Burkman, 1993).

An information base for perspective students interested in pursuing their degree in the online format is important. Current program information should be available through brochures, a program web page, conference booths, and advertisements in discipline-related journals. All resources should include admission prerequisites and procedures, technology requirements, financial aid, and a program of study with course descriptions. Additionally, access to an online program course through a guest pass can be an effective recruitment tool.

Faculty Concerns and Needs

In addition to the administrative support mentioned earlier in the article, professors need instructional support from the university and college levels through training and resources. A faculty, media-enhanced orientation that includes both face-to-face and online components models online teaching techniques and is helpful for faculty. Instructors under this approach are able to work with the materials and tools in the same manner in which their students will experience them. A series of seminars, activities, labs, and special presentations help faculty build effective models and processes. Instructors learn how to create or reengineer an assignment or assessment strategy for online courses, based on the conception of forming learning communities and expected learner outcomes. A small grant program available to instructors that includes stipends for each team member, funding to hire a student assistant who is knowledgeable in web design and development, and funding to purchase new multimedia computers can be extremely effective.

Interested and enthused faculty remain committed to online teaching if their personal satisfaction outweighs the considerable time management and technological demands in course design, development, implementation, and

maintenance. Prior consideration should be given to factors such as year-end academic evaluations, the teaching role in the tenure/promotion process, and release time for online course development, and should be discussed with appropriate deans and chairs.

Faculty should consult with instructional designers, web masters, graphic artists, computer specialists, and information resource providers (librarians, copyright experts, etc.) to establish realistic course development expectations and to develop key support personnel contacts.

Online focus groups across disciplines will enable faculty to discuss strategies for coping with the additional workloads, to monitor and correct negative influences or attitude changes, to write cross-discipline grants, to determine academic credit and recognition for online course delivery, and to develop assessment and evaluation procedures.

CONCLUSION

Critical mass in virtual campus development occurs with the right combination of faculty enthusiasm, technological capabilities, administrative support, student interest, and the recognition of instructional possibility. We contend, therefore, that successful web-based delivery depends on integrating quality assurance strategies into the program. An organized approach through this rubric might provide the framework for the design, development, implementation, and management of an effective online program, and will ensure a successful experience for both faculty and students.

Moving to a web-based program involves a drastic change for the traditional academy—a change not universally embraced and one that causes dissonance in both faculty and students' role expectations.

Any preconception by students that web-based courses require less work is quickly dispelled when they realize that the workload is equivalent to or greater than face-to-face classes even though in a much more flexible context. Very quickly, students realize that weekly procrastination—a stance permissible in face-to-face classes—brings disastrous results in the online experience. If our online students are to be successful, they must become

independent learners who assume responsibilities far beyond those encountered in face-to-face classes.

Teachers encounter even more drastic changes and those changes are rapid in nature. Their primary role shifts from dispensing information to facilitating it—not an easy transition for many instructors. Additionally, many faculty members, who were expert teachers in their face-to-face classrooms, now find themselves novices confronting new and intimidating technologies (Berliner, 1988). With increased time demands and continuous teaching engagement, faculty frustration ensues. Instructors also encounter many more technical problems in their electronic classrooms—problems they are often powerless to remedy. Professors must devote much more time to course start-up and management. Online instructors find that their teaching must be much more precise and that ambiguities usually tolerated in face-to-face classes present formidable problems in the web-based environment. Successful teachers at UCF advise their colleagues that extensive preparation is the key to success when teaching online.

These changes in expectations for students and faculty require that developers carefully attend to all phases of the program by systematically applying quality assurance strategies. These strategies insure that the proper support mechanisms are in place so that faculty and students don't have to "go it alone." They guarantee that the online initiative properly fits into the strategic plans of departments and colleges. They bring course development in line with the principles of instructional design. Most importantly, however, developing an online program around quality assurance strategies builds an environment where students and faculty realize the potential offered by the web-enhanced classroom. In electronic classrooms with no clocks, no walls, and no people, faculty report self-improvement and satisfaction with the potential Internet technology offers. Students report a more active involvement in their learning and satisfaction with newly learned technical skills and empowerment. Clearly, the qualitative tone of the future depends on the quality assurance in all university programs.

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