Evaluating Online Programs

Kathleen D. Kelsey
Oklahoma State University, USA

James R. Lindner
Texas A&M University, USA

Kim E. Dooley
Texas A&M University, USA

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND: USING BEST PRACTICES AS A STANDARD FOR PROGRAM EVALUATION

Systematic evaluation of distance-education programs is necessary for program improvement (formative) and accountability (summative). When evaluating distance-education programs, it is advisable to consult the best practices literature for determining the criteria and standards for quality programming in order to judge the merit and worth of the program under consideration.

The most frequently cited reference for best practices comes from the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (1997) (http://www.wiche.edu/telecom/), otherwise known as WICHE. Pennsylvania State University (PSU) (1998) published a document for designing distance-education programs that incorporate the literature base of best practices. WICHE and PSU offer principles for best practices in distance education in regard to curriculum and instruction, institutional context and commitment, and evaluation and assessment. General concerns with each category should be considered in developing an instrument for measuring quality in distance-education programs (Law, Hawkes, & Murphy, 2002). These concerns are outlined in Table 1.

MAIN FOCUS: HOW DO WE EVALUATE?

Given the variety of distance-education programs available today, from offering one course to an entire degree program, program evaluators should not adopt a standardized instrument to use for evaluating programs. Rather, they should consider the best-practices literature as a guide to developing an evaluation plan that addresses the unique context and setting for their distance-education program (Law et al., 2002).

Best practices for distance education can be used as a gold standard for setting the criteria for evaluating distance-education programs. The underlying question to ask when designing an evaluation should be: Is this particular standard relevant to the program? If so, to what degree of quality should it be measured? Rubrics built upon best practices are helpful tools in developing criteria for measuring program impacts. Not every program will have every best practice, as not all practices are appropriate for all programs. The

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Consistency of program with institutional mission</th>
<th>Evaluators should look for evidence that offering distance education is in line with the institutional mission and is well supported with adequate budgets and support staff.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Provisions for program oversight and accountability</td>
<td>Academic and technical oversight should be obvious to evaluators.</td>
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<td>Provision of student support</td>
<td>Evaluators should examine Web sites and other media to ensure that students have access to all the required contexts for learning online.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Implementation of evaluation and assessment measures</td>
<td>Evaluation is a critical component of an excellent distance education program and should not be an afterthought but rather incorporated into the planning phase of the program from inception.</td>
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