Chapter 1
Encapsulating the Basic Tenets:
Best Practices in Independent,
Distance, and Online Learning

Gera Burton
University of Missouri, USA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With increased emphasis on transparency and learning outcomes, the NCA Higher Learning Commission has challenged institutions to demonstrate greater accountability in educational programming (2000). This chapter traces the steps taken to establish a set of guiding principles, or best practices, for endorsement by the American Association for Collegiate Independent Study (AACIS) membership. The AACIS membership is comprised of practitioners from institutions engaged in the provision of self-paced, independent educational opportunities for students who require flexible options, including year-round enrollment. While it was anticipated that agreement on all aspects of online delivery would be impossible, a consensus on core principles was seen as attainable. The purpose of the initiative was to lay the groundwork for further refinement of standards of practice by practitioners engaged in the delivery of online, distance, and independent learning programs.

BACKGROUND

Despite assurances from a variety of commercial sources, there is still no consensus on what would be considered best practices in distance or online learning. Purveyors of expensive learning management systems (LMSs, or software used for delivering, tracking, and managing training) execute impressive marketing campaigns by touting the benefits of their products to a largely uninformed public—and an only slightly better informed group of administrators—eager to share in the success of the online education boom. Surprisingly, seasoned independent study practitioners have been hesitant to set down the basic tenets upon which courses are designed, developed, and delivered. Yet, on university campuses, nationally and internationally, there exists a wealth of Independent Study expertise on every aspect of extending flexible, cost-effective educational programming to students at a distance.
These professionals confirm, as their evidence suggests, that “students learn best when they act as independent, critical researchers within their disciplines” (Curran, 2008, p. 35).

As early as 1873, educational pioneer Anna Eliot Ticknor founded the Society to Encourage Studies at Home to provide learning opportunities for women by correspondence. With little fanfare, the Society reached more than seven thousand women around the United States over a 24-year period (Bergmann, 2001). In the wake of Ticknor’s success, numerous societies sprang up to serve a dispersed population of men and women who were eager to learn. Since the turn of the 20th century, self-directed learners have continued to seek individualized, asynchronous options outside the classroom and beyond the confines of the traditional semester. The time-honored independent study methodology could not have been sustained for decades if a gap had not existed in higher education for self-directed learners. Ignored by most traditional educational institutions, millions of individuals—members of the military, missionaries, athletes, performers, and scores of others—outside the educational mainstream (collectively known as ‘non-traditional students’) empowered themselves by opting for self-paced, asynchronous, independent study arrangements.

Because educators, especially at the postsecondary level, have been reluctant to admit that learning may take place outside the traditional classroom, they have often blocked attempts to broaden their institutions’ scope for non-traditional learners. Whether this was driven by a desire to protect their own turf or arose from a genuine sense of skepticism about the independent learning process, they have frequently held university-sponsored Independent Study programs to a higher standard than that demanded of on-campus programs. Some administrators even employed classroom-based quality standards to exclude programs that did not conform to the dominant model. This study reveals that the history of Independent Study is one of reassuring central administration of its capacity to ‘measure up’ to the standards of the classroom.

The 2008 Report of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), Promoting Engagement for All Students: The Imperative to Look Within, while focused on the resident student, reveals interesting findings about the independent learner. Relative to classroom-based learners, both first-time and senior online learners reported “more deep approaches to learning in their coursework” (p. 16). The Report proceeds to speculate on the reasons for this finding:

*It may be that students who pursue online courses—such as older students for whom the flexibility and convenience of the medium may be particularly important, given work or family commitments—are those who embrace the spirit of independent, student-centered, intellectually engaging learning as captured by the deep learning measures. It may also be the case that professors who teach online courses make more intentional use of deep approaches to learning in their lesson plans.* (p. 16)

The fact that online and independent learners outperformed their on-campus counterparts in reflective learning and higher-order thinking comes as no surprise to Independent Study practitioners. The NSSE Report concludes what they have long known: “Online courses seem to stimulate more intellectual challenge and educational gains” (p. 16). Because Independent Study students may enroll at a time of their choosing and take up to nine months to complete a course, they have the opportunity for reflection beyond the regular semester schedule. Distance tends to allow for more reflection, analysis, and surfacing of connections as students develop techniques to ‘interrogate the text.’ In practice, Independent Study is ideally suited for those courses designated ‘writing intensive’ or that demand more extensive writing assignments. Students have more time for those
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