

**EDUCAUSE** Center for Applied Research

**Research Bulletin**

**Volume 2002, Issue 3**

February 5, 2002

# **Information Technology and Accreditation in the United States**

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## Overview

Changes in distributed learning are moving higher education from correspondence courses to online courses, from duplication machines to course management systems, and from snail mail to the Web. These same changes may alter accreditation standards and procedures, the system of quality assurance for U.S. higher education. Once focused on residential campus learning structures with little attention to off-campus programs, accrediting commissions have begun to address the ramifications of technology-supported learning, whether it occurs on- or off-campus, at both traditional institutions and for-profit educational ventures. The accreditation of the University of Phoenix, Jones International University, and Western Governors University, for example, have been both praised and attacked. This Research Bulletin reviews the response of regional accreditors to technology-enhanced academic support systems and distributed learning, and then speculates on the impact of this response for higher education.

Accreditation standards reflect the values and measures of quality in higher education. Changes to those standards affect traditional procedures, such as the institutional self study and measures such as the number of volumes in the library. Public documents from the regional accrediting agencies demonstrate a movement towards greater acceptance of the innovations in higher education. Electronic portfolios and learning outcomes are increasingly mentioned in the material provided by regional accrediting agencies, indicating an ongoing evolution of the definition of quality education.

Accrediting commissions are paying increasing attention to the use of instructional technology, new academic support systems, and other innovations. Given their basic mission of quality assurance, accrediting bodies reflect the values of their constituencies. (While there are a large number of specialized accrediting agencies for programs and schools as well as a variety of other national accrediting groups, the focus in this Research Bulletin is on the regional commissions and the national accreditation organization listed in Appendix 1.) Recent activity within the accrediting associations reveals an evolving recognition of the place of information technology in supporting quality academic programs, and offers evidence of the major transitions in higher education from inputs to learning outcomes, from physical infrastructure to a blend of physical and virtual infrastructures, from on-site education to distributed learning and from compliance review to assessment of performance against institutional objectives.

## Highlights of Accreditation Structures

Although the procedures and standards of accreditation in the United States are changing, reflecting increased endorsement of nontraditional programs, the history of accreditation provides a necessary context for the discussion.

### Regional Accrediting Associations

Eight regional accrediting associations are recognized by the U.S. federal government as the quality assurance organizations for higher education institutions. Each is

governed by a commission made up of representatives of member institutions. The Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges, for example, is governed by a commission made up of accredited institutions in Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, and Washington. Through the Association the institutions establish the standards and procedures for granting and maintaining institutional accreditation. While programs and schools within institutions in the Northwest may be accredited by various other associations (e.g., the American Association of Colleges and Schools of Business), the Northwest Association is recognized by the academy (and the federal government) as the primary agency for accreditation in the region.

The “regionals,” as they are often called, base their standards and procedures on the realities of traditional institutions, which constitute the bulk of their membership, rather than on new entities such as virtual universities. Even so, the shift in emphasis to learning outcomes rather than on inputs (e.g., the number of volumes in the library or the number of full-time faculty) represents some of the changes accepted by the regionals.

### **Peer Review**

The heart of accreditation in the United States is the peer review process, in which a visiting committee of faculty and administrators (“evaluators”) applies standards and criteria, measures the institution against its mission, and reviews the institution’s self study. The resulting report is reviewed by the commission of the association. It is this application of standards of academic peers that characterizes regional accreditation in the United States. (Other countries have procedures such as audits that do not rely upon academic peer review.) While assuring continuity and consistency, the system allows for an interpretation of necessarily broad standards and favors gradual change even in a decade of “paradigm shifts.”

### **Historical Perspective**

Previous standards have made minimal mention of information technology. For example, the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association (NCA) includes a General Institutional Requirement that an institution “provide its students access to those learning resources and support services [necessary] for its degree programs”(#18). In its Criteria for Accreditation (#2), NCA requires that “[t]he institution has effectively organized the human, financial, and physical resources necessary to accomplish its purposes.” Included as evidence that the institution meets this requirement is the explanation that it must demonstrate “academic resources and equipment (e.g., libraries, electronic services and products, learning resource centers, laboratories and studios, computers) adequate to support the institution’s purposes.”

While such language might seem unusually broad and even vague, the standards are guidelines to the very wide range of institutions as well as the peer review teams and the commissions themselves. The standards are used for both initial and continuing accreditation.

During the last decade the accreditation community has begun to reflect changes such as distributed learning and the creation of new online institutions. In collaboration with the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET), accreditors

began discussing benchmarks of best practice as a means of modifying existing guidelines.

In 1997 WCET <<http://www.wiche.edu/>> published “Good Practices in Distance Education,” which included the “Principles of Good Practice in Electronically Offered Academic Degrees and Certificate Programs.” By 2000, the eight regional accrediting associations had drafted the “Statement of Commitment by the Regional Accrediting Commissions for the Evaluation of Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs.” This led to the creation of another document, “Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs.” Since then the regional accreditors have begun to draft changes to their standards and procedures to reflect these principles. The sequence of events illustrates the growing significance of distance education in the development of changes to accreditation standards and procedures.

While the “Statement of Commitment” by the regionals seems to address only distance education, the authors pointedly note that “technologically mediated instruction” raises “fresh questions” about the educational experience and the resources that support it. The statement says that the “application of new technologies to education has resulted in unprecedented cooperative agreements” among institutions with other colleges and with outside entities. Such agreements are not limited to distance education. Partnerships to form state virtual universities, agreements to accept courses and programs, and a variety of other contracts among institutions have begun a pattern which breaks the boundary of distance learning and tacitly acknowledges that institutions can no longer separate residential and off-campus programs.

The document “Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs” (to which the accreditors are now committed) recognizes distributed learning and the relationship of off-campus programs to others of the institution. One protocol specifically spells out the criterion of significance to IT services: “The institution assures adequacy of technical and physical plant facilities including appropriate staffing and technical assistance, to support its electronically offered programs.” The questions that follow refer to staffing and such key issues as privacy, security, and safety. Other protocols press issues of integration between electronically offered programs and “mainstream” programs, the reliability of outsourced services, the seamlessness of programs, the technical support for all students, and the appropriateness of technologies across the curriculum.

A careful reading of the key documents—“Best Practices” and the “Statement of Commitment”—suggests that regional accreditors have taken significant steps to recognize distributed education and its relationship to mainstream programs. These documents foreshadow the convergence of on-campus and off-campus programs, and most importantly, the acceptance of anywhere, anytime access to learning.

### **Revision of Standards and Procedures**

Until the revised standards and procedures are applied by teams of evaluators, one cannot say how changes in accrediting practices reflect the infusion of technology into learning. How will changes in technology impact quality? How will institutions present

those changes? How will they be viewed by visiting evaluators? Specific answers would be speculative at this point; one can look only at the recent changes in the written standards.

The Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), for example, after a lengthy process has created a new model for accreditation, recognizing such changes in higher education as distributed learning and learning outcomes. The new model “promotes the development of internal institutional indicators” rather than external standards. The model represents a shift from a “compliance mode” to a focus on continual quality improvement. The emphasis falls on the institution’s priorities and objectives. This new model allows institutions—new and established—to state their educational objectives and to provide evidence of their progress towards meeting those objectives.

Other accreditors have moved in directions similar to WASC. The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) of the North Central Association drafted a “Statement of Mission, Vision, Core Values and Strategic Priorities.” Like WASC, the HLC emphasizes the need for institutions to identify priorities, measure learning outcomes, and demonstrate quality in student learning. The draft de-emphasizes the self study and the total institutional review, and directs institutions to provide evidence of quality improvement. The acceptance of innovation and change conveys a very different attitude towards new institutions and new initiatives contrasted with earlier standards.

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) has proposed language which suggests changes similar to those of WASC and the HLC. A “Quality Enhancement Plan” is to be submitted as part of the institution’s internal review in the ninth year for those about to undergo a decennial review. The plan is to “focus on the institution’s strengths and weaknesses as well as its plan for addressing a particular issue or issues critical to the enhancement of quality of its programs and services. The plan will pay particular attention to matters such as student learning outcomes.” Under the section on “Library and Other Learning Resources” the SACS has replaced the phrase “information resources” with “information technology.”

Regional accrediting associations are adapting to changes in higher education including the shift from inputs to learning outcomes, the increase in distributed learning, and the penetration of technology into classrooms—“real” or virtual. Accreditors will apply these modified standards to higher education institutions over the next decade as accreditation reviews take place.

## **What it Means to Higher Education**

The implications of the accreditation changes are greatest for new institutions, for those with major programs in distributed learning, and for those with significant technology-supported learning programs. Institutions that have chosen not to invest in information technology are protected from changes in standards regarding information technology.

While the impact of evolving accreditation standards varies from one regional accreditor to another, the following consequences and opportunities should be noted:

- For institutions with minimal distributed learning and/or minimal IT support, changes in accreditation standards and criteria are primarily permissive and elective. Those institutions that want to be evaluated by more traditional standards are able to do so.
- Newly initiated institutions relying heavily on IT will find that the standards are better adapted to their mode of program delivery. Prior standards referred to full time faculty functions and governance as well as the expectations of traditional classrooms. New institutions, such as virtual universities, will find accommodation of innovations such as technology applications with a strong emphasis on traditional academic values.
- Those institutions with major programs in distributed learning and/or significant IT support, which are approaching an accreditation process, may choose to
  - highlight IT support of academic instruction (on- and off-campus) through collection of data on the activity;
  - emphasize the role of IT support in the classroom by assembling data on the frequency of such support and the assessment of its impact on learning;
  - demonstrate, through the collection of data, how specific IT applications have increased the quality of academic programs;
  - emphasize and demonstrate through learning assessment the efficacy of specific software applications; and
  - present the institution's investment in technology and the changes in instructional quality because of these investments.

How an institution is assessed depends upon the standards and criteria of the applicable regional accrediting association as well as the expertise and training of evaluators. Outside consultants and accreditation association staff will be helpful in advising institutions on how to represent the impact of instructional technology. The WASC changes, for example, appear to the open door to institutions that want to demonstrate how they have increased the quality of learning through new structures, new technologies, and new learning paradigms.

Scanning the materials published by the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) and the regionals may be very helpful in assembling IT material for an accreditation report or visit. Reviewing the material prepared by WICHE and accreditation guidelines from several accreditors may help institutions understand these new approaches.

Institutions are well advised to set up a schedule several years in advance in order to gather data over a period of time. For example,

- Five years before an expected visit, automate the collection of data on the use of technology (e.g., number of courses, programs, students impacted, students

in online courses, faculty teaching online, faculty using Web resources, and so forth) and review that data carefully every 6 to 12 months until the final visit.

- Four years before the visit, review the categories and take steps towards better evaluating the impact of technology on learning.
- Three years before the visit, initiate plans for presenting data whether in print or in online portfolios. Present the material in the various formats in order to evaluate the data, its presentation, and its relationship to institutional goals and objectives.
- Two years before the visit, review the composition of the committee(s) preparing for the visit. How are distributed learning and other technology-supported learning perspectives represented on the committee? Does the data collected reflect the institution's efforts?
- One year before the visit, conduct a mock visit with the presentation of data before a model committee, including people from outside the institution who understand accreditation.

Such a plan can result in a more coherent and convincing exhibition of technology in the institution as well as its relationship to the academic goals and objectives of the institution.

## Where to Learn More

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- Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications. "Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs" and "Statement of Commitment by the Regional Accreditor Commissions."

<http://www.wiche.edu/telecom/article1.htm>

### **About the Author**

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# Appendix 1

## Regional Accrediting Associations

Association	URL	Member States
Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (MSA)	Middle States Commission on Higher Education <a href="http://www.msache.org">www.msache.org</a>	Delaware, District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, Virgin Islands
New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC-CIHE)	Commission on Institutions of Higher Education <a href="http://www.neasc.org">www.neasc.org</a>	Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut
New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC-CTCI)	Commission on Technical and Career Institutions <a href="http://www.neasc.org">www.neasc.org</a>	Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut
North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA)	The Higher Learning Commission <a href="http://www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org">www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org</a>	Arkansas, Arizona, Colorado, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, North Dakota, Nebraska, Ohio, Oklahoma, New Mexico, South Dakota, Wisconsin, West Virginia, Wyoming
Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges (NWA)	Commission on Colleges and Universities <a href="http://www.cocnasc.org">www.cocnasc.org</a>	Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Washington, Utah
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS)	Commission on Colleges <a href="http://www.sacscoc.org">www.sacscoc.org</a>	Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia
Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC-ACCJC)	Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges <a href="http://www.wascweb.org">www.wascweb.org</a>	California, Hawaii, and Pacific Territories
Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC-ACSCU)	Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities <a href="http://www.wascweb.org">www.wascweb.org</a>	California, Hawaii, and Pacific Territories
Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA)	<a href="http://www.chea.org">www.chea.org</a>	National

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