

QUALITY ON THE LINE

The Institute for Higher Education Policy (2000). *Quality on the line: Benchmarks for success in Internet-based distance education*. Available at <http://www.ihep.com/Publications.php?parm=Pubs/Abstract?30>.

ABOUT THE REPORT

- The report identifies 24 benchmarks for quality in Internet-based distance education, divided into seven categories.
- The report was produced by the Institute for Higher Education Policy. It was jointly sponsored by the National Education Association and Blackboard, Inc. (makers of the *Blackboard CourseInfo* course management system for online learning).

QUOTES

"...vitriol and hyperbole."

--Regarding the polarized nature of debates on distance education. p. vii

"Not since the printing press was invented by Johann Gutenberg in the 15th century has an "invention" generated so much potential to change dramatically how people communicate and interact with one another."

--Regarding the advent of the Internet, p.5

"The same standards and benchmarks we use in distance education should be applied to on-campus courses as well. [But] It doesn't happen that way here or across the country." p.13

"The lines between traditional classroom instruction and Internet-based education are becoming blurred." p.15

"Online courses require more discipline, but you can work at your own pace."

--Student (p.16)

"Self-directed study, which is prevalent at the graduate level, is being pushed down to the undergraduate level because of online learning." p.17

"I have only had two bad experiences with online classes...they were more like correspondence courses and lacked feedback from the professors on assignments."

--Student (p.19)

"There seems to be an inordinately high number of the following grades: "A", "F", and "W" (withdraw) for online students." p.21

INTRODUCTION

Growth of Distance Education

From 1994-95 to 1997-98, the number of distance education programs increased by 72%. An additional 20% who did not have such programs plan to have them.

An estimated 1.6 million students were enrolled in distance education courses in 1997-98.

Benchmarks

This growth has led several organizations to publish guidelines or benchmarks for distance learning. However, prior to this report no one had ever consolidated these benchmarks, not attempted to discern whether they are applicable to *Internet-based* distance education.

Mission

The Institute for Higher Education's mission was to

- validate published benchmarks
- ascertain the degree to which these benchmarks are actually used by colleges and universities
- determine how important each benchmark is to students, faculty, and administrators.

Why Internet-based Distance Education?

- It's now the prevalent form of distance education media.
- It's the fastest-growing form of distance education media.
- A growing number of faculty are creating "hybrid" courses that integrate traditional classroom instruction with the Internet.
- It removes the physical and time restraints for both instructors and learners and allows learning to occur anytime, anyplace.
- It is in many ways fundamentally different from classroom-based education.

METHOD

Interviews

The method chosen was case studies of institutions considered leaders in distance education. One hundred and forty-seven interviews were conducted (42 students, 27 faculty, 62 administrators, and 16 faculty/administrators).

Survey

All interviewees also completed a Likert scale-type survey that asked participants to rank prospective benchmarks on two dimensions:

1. To what extent is this benchmark present or absent at your institution?
2. How important is this benchmark to ensure quality?

Possible Outcomes

As a result of the 2 factors in the survey, four outcomes are possible:

- 1) benchmark present, important
- 2) benchmark present, not important
3. benchmark absent, important
4. benchmark absent, not important

Three Phases

The study had three phases:

1. Compile a master list of published benchmarks
2. Identify institutions with substantial experience in, and leadership in, Internet-based distance education. The institutions should also be accredited and offer more than one program via distance education.
3. Visit those institutions and conduct interviews with students, faculty, and administrators.

The Six Institutions

1. *Brevard Community College*: has offered distance education courses since 1974 and is part of the PBS's "Going the Distance" program.
2. *Regents College*: founded in 1971, it focuses on working adults and offers online graduate programs in Nursing and Liberal Studies.
3. *University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*: offers 20 degree or certificate programs via the Internet.
4. *University of Maryland University College*: offers 14 bachelor's and 10 master's degree programs online, and has over 25 years experience in distance education.
5. *Utah State University*: involved in distance education since 1911, they offer both semester-based and independent study programs online.
6. *Weber State University*: currently offers 2/3 of the online learning courses in Utah.

HOW DID THE BENCHMARKS RATE?

Most of the benchmarks identified in phase one of the research were judged to be important. However, 13 benchmarks were eliminated, three were added, and several others were combined, leaving a final list of 24 benchmarks in seven categories.

THE BENCHMARKS

I. Institutional Support

1. A documented technology plan (one that includes electronic security measures) is in place and operational.
2. Reliable systems (as failsafe as possible).
3. A centralized system that provides support for building and maintaining distance learning infrastructure.

II. Course Development

4. Guidelines regarding minimum standards for course development, design, and delivery---guided by learning outcomes rather than the availability of existing technology.
5. Periodic review of instructional materials to ensure that they meet those standards.
6. Courses that require students to engage in analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (i.e., the upper levels of Bloom's Taxonomy).

III. Teaching/Learning

7. Student interaction with faculty and other students is facilitated through a variety of ways including email and voicemail.
8. Feedback to students is provided in a timely and constructive manner.
9. Students are taught how to perform research and assess the validity of information sources.

IV. Course Structure

10. Students are advised regarding the necessary motivational factors and technology needed to succeed in an online course---*before* they sign up for an online course.
11. Students are provided with supplemental course information (e.g., course objectives, learning outcomes).
12. Students have access to sufficient library resources (though this may occur via an online library).
13. Faculty and students agree on expectations regarding deadlines for assignment completion and faculty response.

V. Student Support

14. Students receive adequate information about the program (e.g., admission requirements, tuition and fees, books and supplies, technical and proctoring requirements, and student support services).
15. Students are provided with hands-on training in research (e.g., how to use electronic databases, interlibrary loans, and news services).
16. Students have access to technical assistance throughout the course, including practice sessions, detailed instructions, and convenient access to technical support.
17. Questions to technical support are answered quickly and accurately, with a structured system in place to address student complaints.

VI. Faculty Support

18. Faculty are provided with technical assistance in course development and are encouraged to use it.
19. Faculty are assisted in the transition from classroom to online teaching and are assessed during the process.
20. Instructor training and assistance (including online mentoring) continues for the duration of the course.
21. Faculty members are provided with written resources regarding student use of electronically accessed data.

VII. Evaluation and Assessment

22. The program's effectiveness is assessed using an evaluation process that has specific standards and uses multiple means of assessment.

23. Data on enrollment, costs, and successful/innovative uses of technology are used to evaluate the program's effectiveness.

24. Intended learning outcomes are reviewed regularly to ensure that they are clear, appropriate, and have utility.

Which Benchmarks Were Added?

- "The reliability of the technology delivery system should be as failsafe as possible."
- "Faculty and students agree on expectations regarding times for student assignment completion and faculty response."
- "Questions directed to student service personnel must be answered quickly and accurately."

Which Benchmarks Were Dropped?

- "Faculty are provided professional incentives for innovative practices to encourage development of distance learning courses."
- "There are institutional rewards for the effective teaching of distance learning courses."
- "During development, the various learning styles of students are considered."
- "Assessment instruments are used to ascertain the specific learning styles of all students, which then determine the type of course delivery."
- "Courses are designed with a consistent structure, easily discernible to students of different learning styles."
- "Course design is managed by teams comprised of faculty, content experts, instructional designers, technical experts, and evaluation personnel."
- "Distance learning course development must be approved through a broad peer review process."
- "Courses are designed to require students to work in groups utilizing problem solving activities in order to develop topic understanding."
- "Course Materials promote collaboration among students."
- "Courses are separated into self-contained segments (modules) that can be used to assess student mastery before moving forward in the course or program."
- "The modules/segments are of varying lengths determined by the complexity of learning outcomes."
- "Specific expectations are set for students with respect to a minimum amount of time per week for study and homework assignments."
- "Faculty are required to grade and return all assignments within a certain time period."
- "Specific standards are in place to compare and improve learning outcomes."

MISCELLANEOUS

"Work With the Willing"

It was noted that volunteers currently teach most Internet-based distance learning courses. While members of this group are highly motivated to create excellent courses and tend to be "early adopters" conversant with the necessary technology, this approach often leads to an array of courses that may not represent a strategic plan.

Class Size

More than one participant recommended that Internet-based distance learning classes have a maximum of 20-25 students.