

ENSURING QUALITY OF ONLINE EDUCATION PROGRAMS



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In spring 2020, as the coronavirus pandemic swept across the country, colleges and universities swiftly shuttered their campuses to students, unsure of for how long or what was coming next. As faculty scrambled to continue their courses virtually, they utilized emergency remote learning to deliver course content like lectures and seminars, facilitated online assessments, and tried to throw together disjointed processes to enable students to complete the Spring 2020 academic semester.

Students also experienced challenges as a result of this shift, which influenced their future educational plans. Seventy-nine percent of students reported that staying motivated to do coursework was a problem and large majorities felt that remote learning made it harder to stay interested in course content and to collaborate with other students. Technology access was also a challenge, as 45 percent of students at least occasionally had internet connectivity issues and nearly a quarter had device issues that influenced their course participation.¹ As a result, nearly two-thirds of young adults (18-24 years old) had either changed or canceled their education plans in the spring of 2020.²

But emergency remote learning is a stark contrast to distance education, which is a defined term in the Higher Education Act that means high-quality education delivered by instructors via various technologies that support regular and substantive interaction with the student.

DISTANCE EDUCATION means education that uses one or more of the technologies listed to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor, either synchronously or asynchronously.³

REGULAR INTERACTION is defined as instructor-driven activity with a student that is “predictable and scheduled.” Substantive interaction is defined as “engaging students in teaching, learning, and assessment, consistent with the content under discussion” and must include two of the following types of instructor-driven activities: providing direct instruction, assessing or providing feedback on a student’s coursework, providing information or responding to questions about the content of a course or competency, facilitating a group discussion regarding the content of a course or competency, or other instructional activities approved the institution’s or program’s accrediting agency.⁴

Distance education often includes elements like self-paced asynchronous lessons, built-in assessments of learning, and intentional designs

that make organization and navigation easy, whereas emergency remote learning that happened in the wake of campus closures was never intended to meet such high standards.⁵ Yet as the majority of today's students continue to attend postsecondary education via remote instruction, there is, in some cases, a gray area between emergency remote learning and high-quality distance education.

As of September 2020, 51 percent of postsecondary students were learning online, and 30 percent have stated that they prefer to continue learning online for the foreseeable future.⁶ As online learning becomes the new norm in higher education, policy and policymakers must ensure the quality of online instruction for the future success of today's students.

Background of distance education

Distance education has its origin in correspondence education, which sought to bridge physical divides between students and postsecondary institutions by making curriculum available in formats that could be accessed from home. Historically, correspondence education involved student-driven learning where students interacted asynchronously with instructors and course content through mail, radio, and television. While correspondence education expanded learning opportunities and allowed students to largely complete coursework at their own pace, the quality and value of these programs was often debated.⁷

With the advent of the internet and the growing accessibility of computers, online distance education became a distinct instructional delivery method and one that generally entails much more interactivity between students, instructors, course curriculum, and assessments. In 2018, more than 6.9 million students were enrolled in online courses, representing 35 percent of all postsecondary students.⁸ As these programs proliferated, researchers and practitioners began to develop standards for quality course delivery. In recent years, colleges and universities increased their online programming and aimed such programs

at adult and/or part-time students because of the flexibility they offer. In addition, institutions have begun partnering more frequently with Online Program Managers (OPMs) to design and operate online courses, recruit students, and train faculty on effective online practices.⁹

For a more in-depth information on distance education, read Higher Learning Advocates' "Distance Education Backgrounder" [here](#).

2018 DISTANCE EDUCATION NEGOTIATED RULEMAKING

In 2018, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) initiated a negotiated rulemaking process to clarify basic definitions of distance education. The final regulations, issued in fall 2020, provided further delineation of the differences between distance education and correspondence education. In particular, ED outlined a list of instructor-driven activities that can satisfy requirements for substantive interaction between students and instructors. The new regulations also note that regular interaction with instructors should be predictable and scheduled and cannot be primarily student-initiated. Further, ED stressed active participation as a key component of distance education and listed examples of what would satisfy and not satisfy that component.¹⁰

Background of distance education *continued*

STUDENT SUPPORTS

The growing prevalence of distance education has led many higher education observers to stress the need for robust student support services to also shift online. Students learning online need access to the same academic resources, like advising and tutoring, and adapting these supports online may be even more important as distance education students have a greater need for self-management and self-efficacy. Further, online learners are generally more demographically diverse than traditional students and require unique non-academic supports—like access to child care and opportunities for peer socialization—that promote their success and sense of belonging.¹¹

ENROLLMENT DECLINE AND VALUE QUESTIONS

The continuation of mostly remote learning at colleges and universities in the 2020-21 academic year has raised questions about remote learning's impact on student

enrollment. Nationally, enrollment across all types of institutions was 2.5 percent lower in fall 2020 than the previous year. These declines were sharpest at community colleges, where enrollment dropped ten percent. About one-third of students enrolled in fall 2020 considered stopping taking courses with nearly half reporting that COVID-19 and emotional stress were primarily driving these sentiments.

As institutions reckon with the challenges and impacts of remote learning, they must consider the promise of formal distance education and the value it can provide to students. A 2019 report found skepticism of the quality of online learning among students, faculty, and employers. It also noted that online programs on average have poor student outcomes and are not drastically more affordable than traditional courses. Many observers fear that the shift to online education will, in essence, be a backslide into the correspondence education of old.¹²

The role of accrediting agencies and NACIQI

Accrediting agencies—entities who assess academic and instructional quality at institutions of higher education—act as “gatekeepers” to Title IV federal student aid, as they certify, or accredit, institutions in order to allow students to use federal dollars in the form of student loans or Pell Grants at an accredited school. Federal policy and regulations govern this process, to a certain extent, by setting standards that accreditors must review for at institutions, including for distance education programs.

As the COVID-19 pandemic forced institutions to close campuses in early 2020 and most programs switched to emergency remote instruction, ED waived distance education accreditation requirements through the end of 2020, or the end of the payment period that includes the end of the federally-declared emergency related to COVID-19. This allowed institutions to work with their accreditor as they continued distance education programs throughout 2020 and into 2021. This unprecedented



situation, in which virtually all institutions switched to an online learning environment, presented unique challenges for accreditors to be faced with so many changes in instruction at once.

In 2021, accrediting agencies worked to address this challenge in a variety of ways to ensure institutions that were operating through emergency remote learning had the tools they needed to support students. Actions taken by accreditors during this time include regular interaction with institutions, including through surveys and interviews to constantly monitor operational status and processes.

Some accrediting agencies also temporarily revised internal processes and systems to accommodate heightened distance learning and to support institutions in a different learning environment.

As accreditors are and continue to be a critical quality assurance check on institutions of higher education, they are an important tool in ensuring the quality of instruction and value of programs that have switched to distance education due to the pandemic, and policymakers should put forth the following actions to improve the new distance learning environment for all of today's students.

Actions at the Department of Education:

- 1 Issue guidance to institutions regarding high-quality distance education:** Now that institutions have continued to see the majority of their students learning at least partially through remote education, and as the ED distance education waiver expired at the end of 2020, ED should issue updated guidance to institutions and accreditors about what components are necessary for high-quality distance education, such as regular and substantive interactions that are on a predictable and scheduled basis and that incorporate all elements of ED's substantive interaction areas, and should include minimum requirements and expectations for instructors of distance education courses.
- 2 Establish a Center for Best Practices on distance education:** As more institutions work to serve learners in an increased distance learning environment, ED should establish a Center for Best Practices to issue further guidance and technical assistance to institutions on how to conduct such programs in a way that ensures high-quality outcomes for all students. Best practices and technical assistance could include expanded information for providers and programs to facilitate in order to support students, like purposefully facilitated courses in an online format, online accessibility, and incorporating meaningful interaction between students and between students and faculty, especially in asynchronous courses.

Actions for the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI):

- 1 Recommend accreditors survey all institutions on distance education action and plans:** NACIQI, as the entity that oversees accrediting agencies, should work with accreditors to recommend they issue a survey to all of the institutions in their purview to assess 1) what actions institutions took in 2020 to switch to distance education programs and how did they monitor quality in such programs; 2) what steps they are currently taking to ensure quality of distance education or hybrid programs; and 3) how they intend to uphold quality of distance education programs for the future.

Actions for Congress:

- 1 Authorize a new fund at ED for accreditors to support high-quality distance education:** A new fund at ED, authorized by Congress, would encourage and support accreditors' efforts to offer technical assistance to institutions in trying to improve the quality of their distance education offerings, and could include guidance such as sharing best practices; providing trainings for faculty; creating cohorts to share practices; and reviewing student success metrics and the needed capacity to meet such metrics. Technical assistance should exclude those who are responsible for conducting site visits or peer reviews. Such assistance should also enable accreditors to help institutions with other challenges related to increased distance learning, such as offering robust student supports in a remote setting.

While immediate steps like updated guidance and establishing a Center for Best Practices are critical, policymakers must continue to learn more about the best policies and practices that serve students in distance learning. Continued examinations may warrant further regulatory and legislative changes, especially as the higher education landscape continues to evolve in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. The ultimate goal is to protect students and drive institutions to implement best practices that lead to quality instruction and best value for students, and delivering high-quality distance education is a key component to student success.

Endnotes

¹ "Suddenly Online, A National Survey of Undergraduates During the COVID-19 Pandemic," Digital Promise.

² "Public Viewpoint: COVID-19 Work and Education Survey," Strada, May 2020.

³ "Accreditation in the United States," U.S. Department of Education.

⁴ "Distance Education and Innovation," Federal Register, The Daily Journal of the United States Government.

⁵ "What Students Are Doing Is Remote Learning, Not Online Learning. There's a Difference," EdSurge, April 2020.

"The Difference Between Emergency Remote Teaching and Online Learning," Educause, March 2020.

⁶ "Public Viewpoint: The Value of Online Learning," Strada, July 2020.

⁷ Kentnor, Hope, "Distance Education and the Evolution of Online Learning in the United States," University of Denver, 2015.

⁸ "Distance learning," National Center for Education Statistics.

⁹ Busta, Hallie, "As traditional colleges grow online, OPM relationships shift," Higher Ed Dive, February 2019.

¹⁰ "New Federal Regulations on Distance Education and Innovation," Blum Higher Education Advising, September 2020.

¹¹ Peters, Bonnie; Crawley, Anita; and Brindley, Jane E., "Student Support Services for Online Learning Re-Imagined and Re-Invigorated: Then, Now and What's to Come," September 2017.

¹² Fain, Paul, "Takedown of Online Education," January 2019.