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Digital Education: The Legitimacy of the Higher Education Virtual Campus  
Accountability, Credibility and Accreditation

Open the Google™ search engine and execute a search for “distance education degree” and in .11 seconds on a LAN connection 1,100,000 sites are referenced off those three simple words. With that type of abundant information and implied options, one might believe that selecting a solid distance education degree offering institution should be a “piece of cake”; think again. The questions that an individual should pose when contemplating a distance education program are numerous. Peterson’s Career and Education Editor, Charlotte Thomas, provides candidate distance education degree seekers with valuable suggestions and critical “red flags.”(Thomas, 2001) Some critical questions bring the candidates focus onto the issues of accreditation and the certification’s worth. It is the intent of this paper to explore the general issue of accountability (i.e., accreditation, credibility, and selection) as it relates to distance education programs and degrees offered at a distance.

### **Accreditation**

In order to discuss the issue of accountability, a base of framework needs to be understood. One of those framework components is accreditation and its role in higher education. Accreditation in simple terms is “any form of independent review of educational programs for the purpose of helping to establish that the learning offered is of a uniform and sound quality.” (Phillips, 2001) In the United States, higher education accreditation has typically been organized regionally. The six major accrediting bodies are non-governmental, though approved by the Department of Education, and are headquartered in their respective territories. The North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA) represents the nineteen state regions in the north central United States. The NCA has recently established a specific Commission for accreditation issues that holds the name The Higher Learning Commission. (Commission, 2001a) This Commission accredits entire institutions; therefore specific programs or courses are not subject to its review.

The Higher Learning Commission identifies five over arching criterion in consideration for accreditation. (Commission, 2001b)

1. The institution has clear and publicly stated purpose consistent with its mission and appropriate to an institution of higher education.

2. The institution has effectively organized the human, financial, and physical resources necessary to accomplish its purposes.
3. The institution is accomplishing its educational and other purposes.
4. The institution can continue to accomplish its purposes and strengthens its educational effectiveness.
5. The institution demonstrates integrity in its practices and relationships.

Under each of these criteria, the Commission considers various elements that indicate evidence that the criterion is indeed present. However, the accreditation of a traditional higher education institution may be quite different from that of a distance education delivery based educational institution. As a result of the uniqueness brought into the accreditation issues, two accrediting bodies specifically oriented toward distance education based institutions have emerged; the Commission of the Distance Education and Training Council and the Commission of Career Schools and Colleges of Technology. (Wonacott, 2001)

The Distance Education and Training Council (formerly the National Home Study Council) is U.S. Department of Education approved as a “nationally recognized accrediting agency”. It has accredited members in Canada, Ireland, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States. (Council, 2001) A quick reference to the institutions listed alphabetically under T – Z finds the following: [United States Open, University \(DE\)](#), [United States Open University \(CO\)](#), [University of Action Learning](#), [University of Leicester's Centre for Labour Market Studies](#), [University of St. Augustine for Health Sciences](#), [Western Governors University](#), and [World College](#). Upon looking over the list a suspicion for the absence of many institutions should arise. Know that while regional accrediting agencies (e.g., North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, New England Association of Schools and Colleges) have a conservative tradition these agencies have accredited campus-based schools which offer distance learning programs. (Hirst, 1999) Even the presumption of only campus-based schools is being altered. In March 1999, North Central Association authorized accreditation to Jones

International University, the first virtual college to receive accreditation from a regional agency. (Newcombe, 1999)

Many institutions strive to secure and maintain accreditation because it provides avenues to federal money. This may also have implications for the students' ability to obtain tuition support, particularly if associated with federal government sources. Hirst offers this word of warning to students.

“If a school states that accreditation is only a mechanism used by the Federal government to distribute financial aid, it does not understand accreditation... or hopes that potential students don't understand accreditation.” {1999 #6}

To the individual seeking to evaluate the integrity of a distance education program, accreditation may serve as one factor, however be wary of using that as the exclusive evaluative criteria.

### **Credibility**

While accreditation serves as one possible measure of accountability, it alone provides only a partial picture. The process of accreditation itself has no shortage of critics. As Gordon Davis, visiting professor at Columbia University Teacher's College laments, “Accrediting bodies, if they survive at all, will have to become more flexible and focused on educational results.”(Smith, 1999) This opinion is reflected by Jamie Merisotis, president of the Institute for Higher Education Policy, who says accreditors' standards for judging quality are going to have to change in the age of the Internet. (Carnevale, 2000b)

The executive director of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools understandably disagrees stating, “that as long as students are attentive and institutions are responsible, accrediting standards don't need drastic changes.” (Carnevale, 2000b) In an effort to measure program credibility, the potential distance education student may view accreditation as a reflection of quality. Unfortunately, “the accreditors are not interested in what or how the students learn, but how many feet of classroom space we have per student”, says Malcolm Gillis, president of Rice University in Houston. (Honan, 1998) This approach runs contrary to various on-line programs that offer competency-based degrees where “the curriculum is stated in terms of competencies rather than student credit hours.” (Albrecht, 2001)

In response to this type of criticism, the six regional accreditation bodies hired the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications to create a draft and work with the Commissions to articulate guidelines for distance education. (Carnevale, 2000a) Those guidelines were adopted by the Commissions and made public in late 2000. Those guidelines are an addendum to this paper as they were reported on the web pages of the Higher Learning Commission. (Commission, 2000) The principles upon which the Commission has constructed their guidelines were first crafted prior to August 1999 by another educational telecommunications project. (WICHE, 1999)

While the bulk of this discussion on credibility has focused on the credibility of the accreditation system, this illustrates the enormity of the problem facing a student desiring to establish a baseline from which to judge a distance education delivered course or program. Left to evaluate on their own, students might seek opinions from former students through various upstart entrepreneurial endeavors such as NewPromise.com and eCollege.com, which are developing a database of student reviews for online courses. (Carnevale, 2000b) While this service may provide some reviews on specific online courses, to what extent can such a resource move beyond anecdotal comments and offer substance to which a prospective student or employer can attach credence?

### Selection

In July 1998, Columbia State University was the target of a lawsuit by the state of Louisiana, which sought to close the doors of the virtual campus. The Columbia State was accused of providing bachelor's degrees via distance education for cash with little academic credibility. (Smith, 1999) How was a student of Columbia State to know that their education was largely a scam?

As more students seek to accommodate a busy lifestyle and the responsibilities of family and work, many are turning to the online options. In 1997-98, now a three year old statistic, 760,000 students enrolled in 54,470 courses. (Wonacott, 2001) As the tendency toward greater access expands, likewise it seems the student's choices will increase. Sally Johnstone, director of the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications, suggests, "Students should comb through their choices and make sure the courses have good instructors, are taught through institutions that are accredited and that provide dependable services online, and offer credits that

are transferable.” In addition, resources such as Bear’s Guide to the Best Education Degrees by Distance Learning are designed to equip the student to be a wise consumer.

A competency-based emphasis, becoming more the standard in online courses, introduces a notable contrast to the brick and mortar experience. (Newcombe, 1999) This raises a worrisome twist for the general or liberal education and the entire system under girding it. (Dusen, 2000) A student intending to pursue an online degree would be advised to recognize the likelihood of contrasts between an on-campus and an exclusively off-campus experience. Yet there are similarities, which both on-campus and virtual campus students cite as desirable – “like a knowledgeable professor who interacts with the students -- plus additional features that help create a sense of community among those taking the course.” (Carnevale, 2000c) Lee R. Alley, author of a study focusing on on-line participants, states, “you don’t transmit knowledge; knowledge is constructed. It isn’t something that’s handed to someone over a high-bandwidth cable.”

### Conclusion

While accessing on-line instruction can be as convenient as a modem and phone line away, there are multifaceted issues to be considered before investing in any distance education program. Foremost consider the issue of accreditation. The student is strongly urged to use accreditation as a means of verifying the providers formalized accountability as an overall institution. The U.S. Department of Education has a list of verified accreditors. Secondly, determine the credibility of the program being considered. While this is more difficult to ascertain as is accreditation, its importance can be immense should program credentials be weighed selectively in the student’s sought profession.

*Locating* a particular program or course offered at a distance is no longer the determining factor in selecting a program of study. The greater task, which a student faces, is that of evaluating the program or course prior to enrolling and committing tuition dollars. By *screening*, carefully and meticulously, each candidate institution with particular focus on accreditation and credibility, a rewarding outcome is attainable. The process of conducting those reviews, however, may not be so easily attainable.

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Addendum #1 of 1

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In order to facilitate the evaluation of distance education throughout the United States, the regional accrediting associations have agreed upon the following definition and guidelines. This agreement is based on an extension of the Principles developed by the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE).

#### DEFINITION:

Distance education is defined, for the purposes of accreditation review, as a formal educational process in which the majority of the instruction occurs when student and instructor are not in the same place. Instruction may be synchronous or asynchronous. Distance education may employ correspondence study, or audio, video, or computer technologies.

#### GUIDELINES:

Any institution offering distance education is expected to meet the requirements of its own regional accrediting body, and be guided by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) Principles. In addition, an institution is expected to address, in its self-studies and/or proposals for institutional change, the following expectations, which it can anticipate will be reviewed by its regional accrediting commission.

#### Curriculum and Instruction

- Programs provide for timely and appropriate interaction between students and faculty, and among students.
- The institution's faculty assumes responsibility for and exercises oversight over distance education, ensuring both the rigor of programs and the quality of instruction.
- The institution ensures that the technology used is appropriate to the nature and objectives of the programs.
- The institution ensures the currency of materials, programs, and courses.
- The institution's distance education policies are clear concerning ownership of materials, faculty compensation, copyright issues, and the utilization of revenue derived from the creation and production of software, telecourses, or other media products.
- The institution provides appropriate faculty support services specifically related to distance education.
- The institution provides appropriate training for faculty who teach in distance education programs.

## Evaluation and Assessment

- The institution assesses student capability to succeed in distance education programs and applies this information to admission and recruiting policies and decisions.
- The institution evaluates the educational effectiveness of its distance education programs (including assessments of student learning outcomes, student retention, and student satisfaction) to ensure comparability to campus-based programs.
- The institution ensures the integrity of student work and the credibility of the degrees and credits it awards.

## Library and Learning Resources

- The institution ensures that students have access to and can effectively use appropriate library resources.
- The institution monitors whether students make appropriate use of learning resources
- The institution provides laboratories, facilities, and equipment appropriate to the courses or programs.

## Student Services

- The institution provides adequate access to the range of student services appropriate to support the programs, including admissions, financial aid, academic advising, delivery of course materials, and placement and counseling.
- The institution provides an adequate means for resolving student complaints.
- The institution provides to students advertising, recruiting, and admissions information that adequately and accurately represents the programs, requirements, and services available.
- The institution ensures that students admitted possess the knowledge and equipment necessary to use the technology employed in the program, and provides aid to students who are experiencing difficulty using the required technology.

## Facilities and Finances

- The institution possesses the equipment and technical expertise required for distance education.
- The institution's long range planning, budgeting, and policy development processes reflect the facilities, staffing, equipment and other resources essential to the viability and effectiveness of the distance education program.