

Office of Academic Planning and Assessment

Best Practices for Documenting Assessment of Online and Distance Education Programs

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As Sam Houston State University continues to expand its online and distance education programs, it is important that the University continue to take all necessary steps to ensure it meets the requirements and recommendations of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC). Colleges and universities are expected to demonstrate the assessment of online and distance education programs when responding to the *Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement* (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 2012). In particular, SACSCOC Comprehensive Standard 3.3.1 states:

The institution identifies expected outcomes, assesses the extent to which it achieves these outcomes, and provides evidence of improvement based on analysis of the results (SACSCOC, 2012, p. 27).

Over the years, SACSCOC has provided some helpful guidelines to consider when programs are offered via online and distance education. Their *Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs* (2000) help define aspects of a quality assessment process:

...the institution conducts sustained, evidence-based and participatory inquiry as to whether distance learning programs are achieving objectives. The results of such inquiry are used to guide curriculum design and delivery, pedagogy, and educational processes, and may affect future policy and budgets and perhaps have implications for the institution's roles and mission. (p. 12)

SACSCOC's *Distance and Correspondence Education Policy Statement* (2012) emphasizes the importance of demonstrating that distance and online learning students are mastering desired learning objectives in a way comparable to face-to-face students:

Comparability of distance and correspondence education programs to campus-based programs and courses is ensured by the evaluation of educational effectiveness, including assessments of student learning outcomes. (p. 3)

The *Guidelines for Addressing Distance and Correspondence Education: A Guide for Evaluators Charged with Reviewing Distance and Correspondence Education* (2011) is perhaps the most useful of these documents as it provides insight into the guidelines used by SACSCOC evaluators for determining an institution's compliance with standards and requirements relating to distance education. Specifically, evaluators consider:

Has the institution implemented a plan for the collection of data relating to its distance learning programs? Is the collected data used in the planning and evaluation process? Are the research activities for collecting data regularly evaluated?

Is there evidence that outcomes for the program have been identified?

Is there evidence that the effectiveness of the distance education program is regularly assessed and steps taken for improvement of the program? Is the evaluation plan part of a broader institutional plan?

Has the institution developed student learning competencies for the courses/programs offered by distance education? If these are the same competencies for courses/programs offered by

“traditional” methodologies, is assessment identified for distance learning students separate from students taking courses by “traditional” methodologies? (SACSCOC, 2011, p. 7)

Given the importance of continuous program improvement and the related emphasis SACSCOC places on adequately documenting the assessment of distance and online education, SHSU must work to ensure it is appropriately documenting such efforts. This documentation at SHSU occurs within the Online Assessment Tracking Database (OATDB) through the documentation of annual, programmatic assessment plans. All degree programs enter their Goals, Objectives, Indicators, Criteria, Findings, Actions, and Plans for Continuous Improvement into the online system. This includes both distance education and hybrid programs with both online and face-to-face students. The following are a series of recommended best practices that will help guide distance and online education programs in documenting their assessment within the OATDB.

First, the program’s Goal and Objective descriptions should make it clear to an outside observer that distance education is a component of its mission. Distance and online education programs often serve unique groups; therefore, it should be apparent how the Goals and Objectives both connect to the program’s students and the overall mission of SHSU.

Second, instruments and measures used to evaluate student attainment of learning objectives should be clearly described. Within the OATDB this is accomplished through the Indicator and Criterion elements. The element descriptions should provide clear details regarding what the measures were, how they were developed, how they were utilized, and the expected levels of success. The descriptions should also clarify whether the Indicators and Criterion relate to face-to-face students, online students, or both. As with the Goals and Objectives, the instruments used to assess student attainment of the desired learning objectives, as well as the program’s expected levels of success for those students, should be clear to an outside observer. This is particularly important for hybrid programs.

Third, assessment results from all sample groups should be reported by programs within the Findings element of the OATDB. When demonstrating the effectiveness of hybrid programs, it is considered best practice to compare the results from face-to-face and distance education students for all shared learning objectives. The purpose is to ensure that both groups are demonstrating similar levels of attainment of the desired learning objectives. There is not an expectation that both groups’ results be identical; however, there is an expectation they be similar. If significant variations between the two groups are identified, then reasons for these variations must be documented and plans of action provided for addressing the gaps. The easiest way for programs to demonstrate equitable attainment will be to disaggregate the assessment results for both online and face-to-face students within the Finding descriptions in a way that is clear to an outside observer.

Finally, it is important that programs clearly demonstrate how Findings are used to improve upon the educational experience for all students within the program, regardless of delivery method, and not just one group to the exclusion of the other. These Actions should be driven by the Findings for both distance education and face-to-face students. Areas for improvement found within one or both groups should be addressed within both the program’s Actions and Plan for Continuous Improvement. As with the other elements, it is important that the connection between Findings, Actions, and Plan for Continuous Improvement be clear to an outside observer.

References

- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. (2000). *Best practices for electronically offered degree and certificate programs*. Decatur, GA.
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