

**Statement of Commitment
by the
Regional Accrediting Commissions
for the Evaluation of
Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs**

Technologically mediated instruction offered at a distance has rapidly become an important component of higher education. Growing numbers of colleges and universities are going on-line with courses and programs, while those already involved are expanding these activities. New providers, often lacking traditional institutional hallmarks, are emerging. This phenomenon is creating opportunities to serve new student clienteles and to better serve existing populations, and it is encouraging innovation throughout the academy. While these are welcome developments, the new delivery systems test conventional assumptions, raising fresh questions as to the essential nature and content of an educational experience and the resources required to support it. As such they present extraordinary and distinct challenges to the eight regional accrediting commissions* which assure the quality of the great majority of degree-granting institutions of higher learning in the United States.

The approach of the regional commissions to these emergent forms of learning is expressed in a set of commitments aimed at ensuring high quality in distance education. These include commitment to those traditions, principles, and values which have guided the regionals' approach to educational innovation; commitment to cooperation among the eight regional commissions directed toward a consistent approach to the evaluation of distance education informed through collaboration with others; and commitment to supporting good practice among institutions.

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Commitment to Traditions, Values, and Principles

The lengthy history of regional accreditation has been one of adaptation to a changing educational environment, of maintaining high standards while also recognizing that education can be provided effectively in a variety of ways. Responsible innovation has been encouraged within a system of accountability grounded in enduring values and principles through which quality has been defined. The result has been an ever-expanding set of educational opportunities, marked by diversity and excellence, to meet the changing needs of our society. It is in keeping with this tradition that the regional commissions individually and collectively are responding to new forms of distance education. Of necessity, this will be a work in progress; educational change continues apace with technological change making efforts to develop settled definitions of the essential structures and conditions in distance education, and procedures to apply them, neither possible or even desirable. Rather, the regionals' response will be developmental, though experience thus far indicates a strong evaluative competence among individual regional accreditors in responding to the ingenuity of colleges and universities as they use technology to better achieve their educational goals.

As they proceed with the assessment of educational programming offered at a distance, the regional commissions will continue to work toward a balance between accountability and innovation. They will seek to sustain an equilibrium between fulfilling the expectation that regional accreditation is a dependable indicator of institutional quality and encouraging perceptive and imaginative experimentation. Sound departures from

traditional formulas will be validated; those falling short will not.

The regional commissions use mission-driven standards to define institutional quality. The college or university that has purposes appropriate to higher education, the resources necessary to achieve those purposes, demonstrates that it is achieving them and has the ability to continue to do so, is one worthy of the distinction of being regionally accredited. This implicitly flexible paradigm is particularly appropriate for the assessment of new forms of distance education as well as technologically-spawned innovations in educational practice on-campus.

While endeavoring to maintain balance and flexibility in the evaluation of new forms of delivery, the regional commissions are also resolved to sustain certain values. These include, among other things:

- that education is best experienced within a community of learning where competent professionals are actively and cooperatively involved with creating, providing, and improving the instructional program;
- that learning is dynamic and interactive, regardless of the setting in which it occurs;
- that instructional programs leading to degrees having integrity are organized around substantive and coherent curricula which define expected learning outcomes;
- that institutions accept the obligation to address student needs related to, and to provide the resources necessary for, their academic success;
- that institutions are responsible for the education provided in their name;

- that institutions undertake the assessment and improvement of their quality, giving particular emphasis to student learning;
- that institutions voluntarily subject themselves to peer review.

There can be no doubt that there are challenges in sustaining these important values through technologically mediated instruction. The regional commissions appreciate this reality, and also recognize that these values may be expressed in valid new ways as inventive institutions seek to utilize technology to achieve their goals.

The regional commissions will continue to limit their scope to include only degree-granting institutions of higher learning. They are also aware, that many of the educational offerings provided at a distance do not lead to degrees, but rather are short-term and highly focused, providing specific skills-training and leading to at most certificates. Such activities at regionally accredited colleges or universities, or at those that seek regional accreditation, undertaken in their name, are considered as included within the institution's accreditation and thus are subject to evaluation.

The regional commissions are attentive to the fact that their field of view increasingly includes educational entities and configurations which test conventional ideas as to what constitutes an institution of higher learning. Generating opportunities for innovative collaboration, the application of new technologies to education has resulted in unprecedented cooperative agreements and configurations among accredited colleges and universities as well as with entities outside the academy. While frequently resulting in a beneficial expansion of educational

opportunity and a greater optimization of assets, these arrangements often result in a diffusion of responsibility for the overall quality of the student's academic experience. In addition, in these situations quality is often dependent on the continued availability of multiple resources only loosely bound. The regional commissions, as they review such arrangements, will consider it essential that accountability be clearly fixed and meaningfully expressed within the accredited entity and that reasonable guarantees are provided to assure the continued availability of necessary resources outside the institution's control.

Commitment to Cooperation, Consistency, and Collaboration

The regional approach to quality assurance has served our society well. Though fundamentally similar, the eight commissions have been able to reflect America's rich cultural diversity in their criteria and operations and undertake useful local experimentation from which the whole has benefited. In addition, regionalism has greatly fostered self-regulation by keeping these accreditors close to their member institutions.

Technologically mediated instruction, increasingly asynchronous and web-based, and as such not location dependent, raises questions about the suitability of the regional approach to quality assurance. The regional commissions recognize this. However, they also note that the great majority of collegiate instruction offered in the United States remains on-ground, and that nearly all on-line programming leading to degrees is being provided by traditional institutions which have a substantial academic infrastructure within a single region. To be sure, this may

change over time, but for the present, the regional framework continues to be appropriately responsive to the current realities of American higher education and is effective in fulfilling the nation's overall quality assurance needs.

Nonetheless, because the new delivery systems are becoming increasingly important, with institutions developing national and international student populations enjoying only virtual residence, the regional commissions have sought and will continue to seek a significant degree of cross-regional consistency, compatible with their independence and autonomy, in evaluating these activities. Moreover, the commissions are seeking to assure that technologically mediated instruction offered at a distance by whatever institution in whatever region meets the same high standards for quality through the application of an evaluative framework utilizing peer review common to all the regions:

- the first-time development of distance education programming leading to a degree designated for students off-campus will be subject to careful prior review;
- institutional effectiveness in providing education at a distance will be an explicitly and rigorously appraised as a part of the regular evaluation of colleges and universities such as the comprehensive visit and the interim report;
- an essential element in all evaluative processes will be institutional self-evaluation for the purpose of enhancing quality;
- in cases where deficiencies are identified and/or concerns regarding

integrity, remediation will be expected and aggressively monitored;

- appropriate action will be taken in keeping with individual commission policy and procedure in those cases where an institution is found to be demonstrably incapable of effectively offering distance education programming.

As each of the regional commissions continues to accrue skill in assessing distance education programming, they are pledged to learn from the experiences of one another particularly when innovative approaches are utilized.

While most institutions providing educational programming at a distance are clearly based in one of the six regions, placing them within the jurisdiction of the local accrediting commission, technology has already demonstrated the possibility of a virtual institution that is not plainly confined to a given location. In those cases, it is not obvious which regional commission should have quality assurance responsibility. Though few such institutions without apparent regional residency are anticipated, this circumstance presents difficult issues for which the regional commissions working through their national organization, the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC) are seeking to address.

The regional accrediting commissions are aware of the need for a collaborative approach which extends beyond their community, that others, particularly the states and the federal government, have a substantial voice in addressing quality assurance issues related to distance education

programming. Building on a well-established tradition of cooperation with state higher education offices and the United States Department of Education, the eight commissions are pledged to continue to work individually and collectively with these agencies to achieve our commonly held goals of assuring the quality of academic offerings regardless of the medium of delivery. To that end, the commissions will seek the continued assistance of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) as a convener and facilitator.

No less important, as self-regulatory entities, the regional commissions recognize the necessity of working collaboratively with their affiliated colleges and universities. Each of the commissions have well established practices and procedures to ensure meaningful institutional involvement in developing standards and more broadly defining in general terms the practice of accreditation within its region. It is with a redoubled commitment to the participative involvement of their respective institutional memberships that the regional commissions will fashion their response to the quality assurance challenges created by technologically mediated instruction offered at a distance.

Commitment to Supporting Good Practice

As the higher education community increasingly expand educational opportunities through electronically offered programming, the regional commissions are committed to supporting good practice in distance education among affiliated colleges and universities. Doing so is in keeping with their mission to encourage institutional improvement toward a goal of excellence. To this end several years ago, each commission

adopted and implemented a common statement of *Principles of Good Practice in Electronically Offered Academic Degree and Certificate Programs* developed by the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET), resulting in a shared approach to distance education. More recently, desiring to complement these efforts, the regional commissions collectively, through C-RAC, contracted with WCET to fashion a more detailed elucidation of those elements which exemplify quality in distance education. Based upon the expertise of WCET and the already substantial experience of the regional commissions in assessing distance education, the resulting statement, *Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs*, provides a comprehensive and demanding expression of what is considered current best practice. It is being utilized by each commission, compatibly with their policies and procedures to promote good practice in distance education among their affiliated colleges and universities.