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The term 'distance education' is a relatively new method of learning where students are not located in the same physical location as their instructors and peers. With the utilization of computer technology, distance learners are able to connect, communicate, and collaborate with one another regardless of where they are located anywhere around the globe. Distance education can be conducted within a 'Facebook' or 'Twitter' type environment (asynchronous) where social interaction between students is not in real-time. The students would post and read all interactive messages via a virtual classroom billboard. With the use of computer web cameras and other audio/video equipment, distance education can also be conducted within a 'Skype' or 'Facetime' type environment (synchronous) where social interaction between instructors and students is in face-to-face, live, real-time sessions. Unlike a traditional classroom where instructors physically collect the student's homework assignments, distance education relies on a student's ability to upload their assignments to the instructor via email or an online computer bulletin board.

Within the field of distance learning, the need and ability to adhere to consistent forms of best practices and guidelines is an important aspect of maintaining a high level of accountability and credibility within the context of academic standards and institutional policy. According to the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), best practices for supporting students within a distance learning environment is broken down into four key components. Contained within these core components are a number of essential factors that addresses an institution's administrative, financial, and technical commitment to the student; an institution's awareness in providing relevant academic information to the student; an institution's ability in recognizing the need for appropriate and fundamental services to the student; and an institution's overall sense of academic community as a social benefit to the student (WASC, n.d.). With this level of support

from the institution, student's must also be well-prepared in their academic approach toward distance learning. Student's must understand and accept the added complexities associated with distance learning programs. Students who anticipate a learning experience that exactly resembles key aspects of a traditional brick and mortar environment would be in for a rude awakening.

According to the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), there is a lengthy laundry list of policy-based standards that must be rigorously followed in order to maintain best practices and guidelines for teacher/faculty within distance learning environments. In terms of teacher preparation, facilitators of distance learning must understand the "online" medium that is being used as the pedagogic foundation for their course curriculum. From a communicative and competency-based perspective, facilitators of distance learning must have the necessary skills to motivate and be effective promoters of student learning within this progressive online pedagogic approach. Commitments in the form of continued training and guidance by the institution for teachers and faculty is central toward the overall success of the distance education program (AFT, 2000). Facilitators of distance learning should also understanding that a clear statement of course expectations must be presented to the students well in advance for reasons that, include but are not limited to, scheduled time commitments; hardware/software requirements; and computing skills prerequisites. These fundamental preparatory elements will aid in building an environment that is conducive toward long-term student interest and academic achievement.

In addition to delivering a comprehensive development and implementation plan intended to foster effective and affective distance education programs, the Accrediting Commission for Community Junior Colleges (ACCJC) also call upon an adaptive and substantive change policy agenda that addresses the importance of evaluating and assessing the effectiveness of both the distance learner and electronically delivered course work. The approach and metrics used to

determine the quality, integrity, and scope of the institutions' distance education program rests heavily on evidence provided by said institutions. For learning institutions, who seek formal accreditation from the ACCJC as a means of demonstrating policy compliancy, a rigorous approval process is conducted to determine an institution's effectiveness in developing distance learning courses that addresses the same observable and measurable learning outcomes found in traditional brick and mortar programs.

Within the ACCJC's change policy, there is a list of rudimentary expectations that must be proven evident during the voluntary accreditation process. Within the context of standardized good practice, learning institutions must clearly define objectives that are deemed appropriate to higher education. In addition, institutions must show that they have established conditions that cater to successful achievement of these objectives with a reasonable level of probability. The evidence presented is in the form of on-going evaluations and assessments of both the student and online curriculums (ACCJC, 2008). According to the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies (WCET), institutional commitment plays a fundamental role in both faculty and student support when framing and executing best practice strategies. The WCET is in complete accord with the ACCJC in terms of the importance and relevance where evaluative assessments is involved. The criticality for institutional accreditation helps to preserve the academic honesty and integrity of a program's overall goals and objectives where student learning and pedagogic instruction is concerned (WCET, 2009).

Reference

- Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC, 2008). Distance learning manual. Washington, DC: Higher Education Department
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