

Distance Education, Accessibility, and Quality Assurance

Alicia David
Macon State College, Macon, GA, USA

alicia.david@maconstate.edu

Abstract

This presentation will discuss some of the current statistics regarding distance education in the United States. It will also address how student disabilities (and their associated accommodations) are and should be impacting these online course offerings.

According to a recent government study, 66% of US colleges currently offer some form of for-credit distance education (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2008). In 2007 more than 20% of higher education students were enrolled in at least one online course, and the 2007 online enrollments were 245% that of the online enrollment seen in 2002 (Allen & Seaman, 2008).

These educational studies have revealed what most educators already knew: online education is becoming increasingly important to colleges nationwide. The number of online courses continues to increase, and larger numbers of students are taking significant portions of their coursework online.

Students reporting disabilities (and requesting accommodation) have also been increasing. Eleven percent of undergraduates have reported or registered as having a disability (NCES, 2006). The 11% statistic suggests that at least 2.2% of the online student population are also students with disabilities, and that 2.2% is likely to be too low because the flexibility offered by online courses is likely to appeal to students with disabilities. Ensuring accessibility in online courses, therefore, is clearly a practical consideration.

Education studies have also revealed that some schools aren't doing all that they can or should to ensure accessibility. Schools were asked how commonly they received requests for academic accommodation. Nearly a quarter of the schools responding didn't know whether or not requests of this type were ever received (NCES, 2008). Another study tracked how closely accessibility guidelines for online course web sites were followed. Nearly half of the schools reported only moderate to minor application of the guidelines while over one-third of the schools either didn't follow any of the guidelines or were unaware if guidelines were being followed (NCES, 2003).

Material published as part of this publication, either on-line or in print, is copyrighted by the Informing Science Institute. Permission to make digital or paper copy of part or all of these works for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that the copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage AND that copies 1) bear this notice in full and 2) give the full citation on the first page. It is permissible to abstract these works so long as credit is given. To copy in all other cases or to republish or to post on a server or to redistribute to lists requires specific permission and payment of a fee. Contact Publisher@InformingScience.org to request redistribution permission.

Awareness is obviously an important part of this equation. Both administrators and educators must be made aware of the accessibility concerns and guidelines as they pertain to online courses. One way of ensuring that this happens is by instituting a Quality Assurance Plan for distance education (and including accessibility within that plan). Instead of focusing on something so intangible as defining quality, many have found it

easier to identify the hallmarks of quality courses and develop a plan based upon those hallmarks (Kidney, Cummings, & Boehm, 2007). The Quality Assurance Plan can be based upon observations at an individual institution or can be pulled from pedagogical standards like Chickering and Ehrmann's "Implementing the Seven Principles..." (1996).

At the conclusion of this presentation, the audience should have a greater understanding of the current educational climate, the barriers to accessibility, and the general steps needed to begin developing a fluid Quality Assurance Plan.

Keywords: distance education, accessibility, quality assurance

References

- Allen, E., & Seaman, J. (2008). *Staying the course: Online education in the United States, 2008*. Retrieved February 20, 2009 from http://sloanconsortium.org/publications/survey/pdf/staying_the_course.pdf
- Chickering, A., & Ehrmann, S.C. (1996, Oct.). Implementing the seven principles: Technology as lever, *AAHE Bulletin*, pp. 3-6. Retrieved February 28, 2009 from <http://www.aahea.org/bulletins/articles/sevenprinciples.htm>
- Kidney, G., Cummings, L. & Boehm, A. (2007). Toward a quality assurance approach to e-learning courses. *International Journal on E Learning*, 6(1) 17-30. Retrieved February 28, 2009 from <http://www.thefreeibrary.com/Toward+a+quality+assurance+approach+to+e-learning+courses-a0159594386>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2003). *Distance education at degree-granting postsecondary institutions: 2000-2001* (Publication #: NCES 2003017). Retrieved February 28, 2009 from NCES Web site: <http://www.epi.elps.vt.edu/Perspectives/2003017.pdf>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2006). *Profile of undergraduates in U.S. postsecondary education institutions: 2003-04* (Publication #: NCES 2006184). Retrieved February 28, 2009 from NCES Web site: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2006/2006184a.pdf>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2008). *Distance education at degree-granting postsecondary institutions: 2006-07* (Publication #: NCES 2009044). Retrieved Feb 20, 2009 from NCES Web site: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2009/2009044.pdf>

Biography

Alicia David is an Assistant Professor in the School of Information Technology at Macon State College. She holds an Ed. S. degree in Computing Technology in Education from Nova Southeastern University. Her current research focuses on disability accommodations and distance education technologies. Ms. David is currently working to complete her doctoral work at Nova Southeastern University. She can be contacted at: alicia.david@maconstate.edu.