Assessing Online Education and Accreditation in Healthcare Management

By
Linda J. Mast, PhD
and
Stephen F. Gambescia, PhD

AUPHA
Linda Mast, PhD, FACMPE is an Associate Professor in the College of Health Professions, Department of Health Services Administration at Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science. Her earned degrees include a BSN from the University of Maryland, an MBA in Health Care Administration from Western New England University, and a PhD in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis from the University of Missouri-Columbia. Dr. Mast has over 20 years of operations and executive administrative experience in health care including the military, academic medical centers, faculty practice plans, outpatient surgery centers, ambulatory care, community hospitals, and long term care facilities. She served as the Chief Compliance Officer for the University of Chicago Health System. During this time, Dr. Mast served on an advisory board to the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Inspector General in Washington, DC. She has published several peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters on a variety of health services, risk management, and education methodology subjects. She has conducted national research related to problem-based learning outcomes and continuing education for physicians. She has taught a variety of graduate and undergraduate healthcare management courses in both traditional classroom and distance learning modes, and is board certified as a Fellow in the American College of Medical Practice Executives. She is the chair-elect of the AUPHA Faculty Forum on Online Teaching and Technology.

Stephen F. Gambescia is associate professor of health services administration at Drexel University, Philadelphia, PA. He has held a broad range of academic administrative positions, including graduate dean, assistant VPAA, and assistant to the president. Prior to working in higher education, Dr. Gambescia has held a number of educational leadership roles eventually serving as a vice president in a metro and multi-state division for two of the largest national voluntary health agencies (American Cancer Society and American Heart Association). He has 30 years of experience in the field of health promotion/disease prevention and public health policy. His research interests have been in tobacco control, chronic disease risk awareness/prevention, and broadly in health communication. His research interests in higher education include continuing professional education program development, evaluation, credentialing, and online learning. He is co-author of a book on Managing a Public Speaker Bureau for Health and Human Services Organizations. Dr. Gambescia has been a student of online learning since 1999.
This white paper is in response to the Association of University Programs in Health Administration and the AUPHA Foundation request to “present a comprehensive and unbiased investigation and report of current best practices and challenges with regard to establishing processes to assess and accredit healthcare administration programs that use an online environment in the teaching/learning process.” It includes a historical overview of the evolution of distance and online learning, and it also represents a comprehensive review and analysis of empirical studies, literature review, interviews, and investigation of contemporary experiences of accrediting organizations that should help create a framework for assessing quality and outcomes of fully online programs.

**History**

This historical overview provides the foundation for understanding the complexities and responsibilities of accrediting bodies in higher education with particular emphasis on the impact of distance and online education. Original regional accreditors were founded in the 1800s on the East Coast as “clubs” with membership criteria (Carey, 2012). This voluntary, peer-based approach worked well when the number of institutions was small. However, growth in the number of institutions and the expansion of federally financed higher education for many students created new demands.

Historically, the peer review process for higher education accreditation in the United States was coordinated through commissions and member institutions. In 1952, the federal government got involved in higher education accreditation with the reauthorization of the GI Bill which stimulated a major influx of students to colleges. This legislation established a peer review process to measure instructional quality and GI eligibility and was limited to institutions that were federally recognized on a list published by the US Commissioner on Education. Later, with the creation of the US Department of Education under the Higher Education Act of 1965, the US Secretary of Education was legally mandated to publish a list of nationally recognized accrediting bodies that are deemed to be authorities regarding the quality of education provided by higher education institutions. While regional accreditation is ostensibly “voluntary,” in practice almost all institutions of higher education submit to regional accreditation so as not to put substantial student tuition money at risk.

Accreditors have had to change and adapt over time to respond to changes in higher education. While all stakeholders agree on the overall goal of accreditation to ensure minimum standards and quality, there have been differences in approaches to the process among accrediting bodies. Quality assurance in the
teaching and learning process is not a hierarchical relationship among stakeholders. Rather, it is an ongoing review, discussion, and set of quality improvement and capacity building actions among stakeholders. These stakeholders include accrediting bodies, providers and administrators of the higher education enterprise, students, professionals and their associations, employers, and the general public (See Figure 1). Each group has its value-added contribution and sphere of influence in the education quality assurance process—especially during times of change. Each group has its understandable needs, capacity for contributions, and limitations when changes are being made.

**Figure 1.**

*The Dynamic Spheres of Influence among Stakeholders in Quality Assurance of Professional Practice (Gambescia, 2006; updated 2012)*

---

One dramatic change in higher education over the past two decades is the growth of distance and online learning (broadly defined). Early experience with distance learning predates the existence of computers, when course materials were delivered by US mail. Early pioneers included the International Correspondence Schools, California Pacific University, and Lifetime Career Schools (McFarlane, 2012). Much has changed in distance learning since the 1990s and earlier. Accrediting bodies have used various definitions of “distance education.” One representative definition is:

*Distance education or distributed learning is a formal educational process that uses technology to deliver instruction to students who are separated from*
the instructor and to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor, either synchronously or asynchronously. The technologies may include Internet, one-way and two-way transmissions through open broadcast, closed circuit, cable, microwave, broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite, or wireless communication devices; audio conferencing, or video cassettes, DVDs and CD-ROMs if used in a course in conjunction with any of the technologies listed (MCHE, 2006).

Online distance learning can be regarded as one of the fastest mainstreamed instructional delivery systems and technologies introduced in higher education (Paolucci & Gambescia, 2007). With Harvard, MIT, UC Berkeley, and other top tier universities embracing the possibilities of online education (Jaschik, 2009, Pappano, 2012), online teaching and learning may be considered to be less of an outlier than in the past. Technological advances have resulted in unprecedented growth and easy access to sophisticated simulation, use of mobile devices, and virtual social structures that create almost unlimited potential to develop robust online class learning experiences for learners of all ages and experience levels. Online learning is recognized as one of the more recent developments to democratize higher education.

Over the past two decades, a great deal has been learned about online learning. For example, a meta-analysis of empirical studies reveals that over 1,000 studies of online learning have been published between 1996 and 2008 (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones; 2010). Studies indicate that more than one third of faculty at public universities have taught online, and more than half have recommended online classes to students based on the report “Online Learning as a Strategic Asset” from Association of Public and Land Grant Universities-Sloan National Commission on Online Learning (2009). As the past decade demonstrates, online learning is becoming well integrated into the higher education environment. In fact, online learning doubled from 1.6 million in 2002 to 3.94 million in 2007 (Sloan-C, 2007). Online learning has become so ubiquitous in higher education that those tracking student participation have moved from “counting” course offerings and student participation to the number of degrees and certificates that can be completed via hybrid format and the number of degrees and certificates that can be completed “fully online.”

With such a fast introduction of a radically new instructional innovation, major stakeholders, including the faculty, were quick to respond to assess quality, academic standards, and impact on accreditation (Paolucci & Gambescia, 2007). Accreditors and other stakeholders recognize that faculty and administrators in higher education have an obligation to ensure the quality of instruction for an
“educated polis” as well as meet the needs of the changing economy. For example, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) summarizes in a report on the condition of accreditation that the accreditation process is based on academic standards and a tradition of intellectual freedom and self-direction, and these academic standards are described using the following principles:

1) responsibility for excellence is on the institution itself;
2) develop goals for student learning that are appropriate to mission, resources, traditions, community and student body;
3) institutions must gather evidence to assess outcomes along with strategies for improvement;
4) clearly communicate educational mission and strategies to the public as well as description of continuous improvement;
5) reliance on independent accrediting organizations to encourage systematic approach to improvements and understanding Federal Government responsibility to see that funds are properly used; and
6) emphasis on transparency (CHEA, 2011).

With the emergence of online learning as a significant teaching innovation, the concept of education anytime and anywhere becomes a central theme. It is considered relevant to the US Department of Education as evidenced by its significant Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education grants that challenged institutions of higher education (IHE) to move to “anytime, anywhere” program offerings. Anytime, anywhere learning has long been sanctioned by the military to ensure access to higher education for their personnel, as well as for their own internal training and education for mission specific skill sets where competency and meeting learning objectives are critical outcomes. While online learning naturally appealed to students truly at a distance, colleges offering online courses, certificates, and degrees learned that students will take courses online not solely because of distance but because of its flexibility and convenience that fit their lifestyle.

Surveys show that the majority of students enrolled in an online degree program live close to the school. For example, a study by the US Department of Education (2009) found that 69 percent of students enrolled in online courses live within 50 miles of the college and 80 percent live within 100 miles. The evidence supports that the virtual classroom is a space that greatly appeals to the consumer and where quality learning can happen (Marovich, 2012).
Having an accurate and useful understanding of the purpose, policies, process, people, and entities involved in the accreditation of institutions of higher education can be challenging. The systems of accreditation in the United States are not homogeneous for a number of reasons. First, there is no single centralized federal agency or similar entity that oversees higher education. Historically, IHE developed along religious, private, or public sponsorship with varying degrees of local, state, and federal oversight. This includes unique pathways for accreditation and variation among professional programs (e.g. law, education, medicine, and engineering). In addition, education for people where there is a high level of interest in protection of public health, safety, and welfare results in multiple levels of oversight. For example, many professions require candidates to have graduated from an “accredited” college before applying for and taking some type of certification test. It is important to note that the certification process within many professions, especially healthcare, is quite complex and each profession has its unique history and set of standards. In short, the goal of accreditation is to ensure that education provided by an institution meets acceptable levels of quality according to the entity making the assessment.

In most cases, the decision for institutions or degree programs within institutions to be accredited is voluntary. However, because of prestige, student recruitment benefits, and rules set by lenders for student loans, most IHE and professional programs seek some type of accreditation. Accrediting bodies themselves must meet certain standards and best practices and they must keep up to date with changes in higher education.

Distance education is an example of a major change in higher education that has caused accrediting bodies to develop new policies, procedures, and best practice guidelines to ensure quality in the online delivery method. At some levels, accrediting bodies do not use different or “special” standards to ensure quality of online education. Examples of both regional accreditors, specialized accreditors, and national accreditors demonstrating application of more universal standards are included in this section. However, as with many technological changes and reforms, the accrediting system takes time to adjust in order to maintain effectiveness and efficiency in carrying out its purpose and objectives.
**Regional Accreditation**

There are six regional accrediting bodies in the US, based on geographical assignment: Middle States Association of Schools and Colleges (MSASC), New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), North Central Association Commission on Accreditation (NCA), Northwestern Association of Schools and Colleges (NWSCU), Southern Association of Schools and Colleges (SASC), and Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). All states and counties are assigned to one of these six agencies. While independent of each other, the six regional associations cooperate extensively and recognize one another's accreditation. Regional accrediting bodies have more oversight than national accreditors.

In providing institutional accreditation, regional accreditors review the organization as a whole. All educational activities, governance and administration, financial stability, admissions, student personnel services, resources, student academic learning and achievement, organizational effectiveness, and relationships with external constituencies are evaluated. The general public may be most familiar with the purpose of regional accrediting bodies. Although regional accreditation is voluntary, as a matter of practice very few IHE do not undergo a decennial self-study for this accreditation. Regardless of type, all accrediting entities generally include the following components:

- A formal entity made of officials (typically a commission) that oversees policies, procedures, and best practices of education that makes the official disposition (e.g. range of dispositions leading to full accreditation) on the IHE seeking accreditation;
- A published set of standards that must be met to achieve accreditation;
- A set of guidelines to assist an IHE in preparation for an accreditation review (i.e. the “self-study”);
- A process and set of procedures to review the IHE for quality assurance;
- A voluntary group of peers who review the IHE for accreditation by reviewing the self-study document and visiting the IHE; and
- Published policies, procedures, guidelines, statements, and best practices for higher education (US Department of Education, 2006 & CHEA, 2009).

A thorough review of accreditor website data and comparison of documents regarding online education demonstrates the practice of regional accreditors to work together on quality issues. There has been an evolution of these documents with movement to a common standard facilitated by a common document. An example is the July 2009 document *Guidelines for Evaluating Distance Education* (On-line Learning) (NCA, NEASC, WASC, 2009). This currently shows up in three of the six accrediting body’s guidelines. Although there is a CHEA Fact Sheet
#2 titled “The Role of Accreditation and Assurance of Quality in Electronically Delivered Distance Learning” published in September 2001 (CHEA) that states “accreditors do not employ identical review practices to assure quality in distance learning,” current evidence indicates this is no longer the case. Although standards, policies, and guidelines may vary by the type of accreditor and type of institution or program that is reviewed, evidence since July 2009 suggests that most regional accreditors already do, or are moving toward, the use of such guidelines. (Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, 2009).

**SPECIALIZED ACCREDITATION**

Specialized accrediting agencies evaluate particular units, schools, or academic programs within an IHE. Some are discipline based such as business, health administration, psychology, or computer science. Many evaluate professional schools such as medicine, public health, or law. The nature of the entity that accredits these organizations has varying affiliations depending on the history of the discipline. For example some may be accredited by quasi-governmental entities, and others by entities affiliated with a professional association.

**NATIONAL ACCREDITATION**

National accrediting bodies accredit post-secondary schools that have historically been narrowly-focused such as vocational schools, health professions schools, or continuing education schools. These are recognized by the US Department of Education. Also, the Distance Education Training Council (DETC) is a national accrediting body focusing on distance education programs in an IHE. Not all online programs seek accreditation from this association. DETC is recognized by CHEA and the US Department of Education. However, regionally accredited schools do not view DETC as their equal which presents problems with transferability of credits (Littlefield, 2012). Many for-profit institutions may seek this type of accreditation. National accreditors have less oversight in their policy and they usually accredit institutions across the country, and sometimes beyond the borders of the United States.

**OVERSIGHT BODIES AND THEIR ROLE IN ONLINE PROGRAM ACCREDITATION**

The Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is a national advocate for self-regulation of academic quality through accreditation. CHEA represents 3,000 degree granting colleges and universities and 60 institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations. The Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare
Management Education (CAHME) is among these. Currently, agencies recognized by both CHEA and the US Department of Education accredit fully online programs in a variety of health sector professions and business administration sectors. Curriculum in these programs is likely to have common content themes representative of those found in health administration programs. Figure 2 (below) presents examples of fully online accredited programs in the healthcare and administration sectors:

**FIGURE 2.**


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accrediting Body</th>
<th>Recognized by:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Council on Rehabilitation Education (CORE)</td>
<td>CHEA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling and Counseling Related Educational Professions (CACREP)</td>
<td>CHEA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Assembly of Collegiate Business Education (IACBE)</td>
<td>CHEA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council on Education for Public Health</td>
<td>US Department of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance Education and Training Council Accrediting Commission (DETCAC)</td>
<td>CHEA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**EXAMPLES OF ONLINE PROGRAM ACCREDITATION**

Interviews were conducted with administrative leadership in two representative accrediting bodies, IACBE and CEPH, in order to gain insight into specific aspects of accreditation specific to online programs. These two accrediting bodies were selected due to the similarities in curriculum between their programs and degrees in healthcare administration. According to Babette Neuberger, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs & Director of Graduate Studies at the University of Illinois School of Public Health (Neuberger, 2012), CEPH does not distinguish between onsite and online programs with regard to key elements for accreditation. The focus is primarily on learning outcomes rather than mode of teaching.

There are a few additional elements addressed during accreditation for online programs as outlined in CEPH Criterion 2.14:

- **General for all programs:**
  - All programs must have competencies and all courses for each degree program must map to those competencies.
  - The School must demonstrate sufficient faculty for all programs (onsite and online).
• Faculty credentials and expertise in subject matter taught (CEPH does not specifically examine teaching expertise or specific training for online teaching).

Specific to Criterion 2.14 for distance education, online programs must be:

• consistent with mission of the School and within the school's established areas of expertise;
• guided by clearly articulated student learning outcomes that are rigorously evaluated;
• subject to the same quality control processes that other degree programs in the school and university are; and
• able to provide planned and evaluated learning experiences that take into consideration and are responsive to the characteristics and needs of adult learners.

CEPH further requires that,

*If the school offers distance education or executive degree programs, it must provide the needed support for these programs including administrative, travel, communication, and student services. The school must have an ongoing program to evaluate the academic effectiveness of the format, to assess learning methods, and to systematically use this information to stimulate program improvements. The school must have processes in place through which it establishes that the student who registers in a distance or correspondence education course or degree is the same student who participates in and completes the course or degree and receives the academic credit.* (CEPH, 2011)

CEPH acknowledges that employed professionals and part-time students value the flexibility offered by online programs. In-residence elements are not required for distance or online programs. Although CEPH fully supports the value of innovative delivery modes such as online, they require demonstrated evidence of adequate faculty support, adequate student-student and faculty-student interactions, and integration of experiential learning. Emphasis is on evaluation of student outcomes (CEPH, 2011). According to Kristin Force at CEPH (November 11, 2012), thirty institutions have at least one fully online degree. There are also several institutions that have fully online public health programs. These include University of West Florida, University of Alaska-Anchorage, University of Montana, and most recently University of New England. It is important to note that many graduate programs offering an MPH may not have CEPH accreditation because the college or university does not have a school of public health. These programs actually “train” more public health professionals who work in the field
than those graduating from a school of public health. While there has not been a qualified accounting of the number of online MPH programs in this category, it is clear that they are growing.

Similarly to CEPH, the International Assembly for Collegiate Business Education (IACBE) emphasizes a mission driven and outcomes based approach to accreditation (International Assembly for Collegiate Business Education, March 2011). According to William Parrot at IACBE, there is no specific distinction between accreditation processes for online or on-ground programs because the emphasis is on academic quality regardless of mode of delivery (Parrot, 2012). However, IACBE is in the process of developing and implementing additional commissioner training to better prepare commissioners who are assigned to conduct site visits where online degrees or online programs are offered.

Common themes exist among these accreditors with regard to online programs. These include a focus on faculty expertise and support, institutional support in terms of resources and application of course delivery methods that enhance learning, and assurance that learning outcomes are met/assessed. For example, it has been established that CEPH has a specific standards section for distance education programs that outlines the need to show equivalent quality control processes to ground programs with rigorous assessment processes. Demonstrated assessment and quality of faculty-student and student-student interaction is highlighted as key. It is fair to say that recruiting representatives for the accreditation process have had to evolve, as few experts were “in the system” to deploy for reviewing online teaching/learning programs.

The higher education literature is now rich with articles on quality assurance for online and distance education. Kaye Shelton, in “A Review of Paradigms for Evaluating the Quality of Online Education Programs,” showed that a number of models, benchmarks, best practices, frameworks, strategies, pillars, etc. exist (Paolucci, 2012, pp. 83-93). These could easily be adopted to suit the needs of an accrediting entity. Shelton organized her findings in the literature around seven themes: 1) Institutional support and leadership; 2) teaching and learning; 3) faculty support, student support, course development; 4) technology evaluation and assessment; 5) cost effectiveness, management and planning; 6) student and faculty satisfaction; and 7) other. Regardless of which construct an accrediting agency chooses, it is clear that these constructs mimic closely the standards used by accrediting organizations.

Using criteria for comparison such as “if it matches in matters of degree with on-ground education, then the program is good,” may limit the broader understanding of how online learning has revolutionized education. For example, Judith...
Eaton, in writing several monographs for the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (2000, 2001) reminds us:

*Whatever our opinions may be about distance learning and its future, there is no disputing the evidence that some elements of the distance learning experience are significantly different from the site-based educational experience. The task for institutions and accreditors is to identify and scrutinize those differences to protect quality* (2001, p. 13).

The concept of academic fidelity is understood as the condition when an online program is “faithful to” or “close to” traditional degree programs. It has stimulated questions with regard to program equivalency. Gambescia and Paolucci (2009) define academic integrity as “how consistent is the online degree program with its campus based counterpart and institutional and professional standards.” They gave specificity to this common term. It is “the extent or level to which university leaders have considered, involved, and entrusted the current academic assets to produce the new educational offering.” They explain that academic integrity is not simply comparing on-ground to online, i.e. one needs to “look like the other,” but when the educational offering is “truly equivalent to the quality and standards of the institution.” In order to determine if the necessary academic assets have been used to develop a newly offered service, Gambescia and Paolucci (2009) outline the following elements:

- Level of involvement of current faculty in all aspects of shared governance in the gestation of the new educational program offering;
- Degree to which decision making has followed standard policies and procedures of the university (i.e. faculty senate, administration, board of trustees);
- Qualifications and competencies of academic administrators having oversight for these program offerings;
- Level of qualifications and competencies of faculty (existing or new) in teaching the new online degree programs and the corollary level of their orientation and training;
- Extent of integration of the principals responsible for the online learning into the full functioning of the university; and
- Quality of the curriculum as compared with the curriculum of their current on-ground degree programs.

The experiences of accrediting bodies with online teaching and learning offer insights into continuing efforts to address innovations in higher education, such as the online environment.
introduced and discussed. As is evidenced in accrediting organizations guidelines for self-study, there is a great deal of emphasis on achievement of learning objectives.

DISCUSSION OF ACHIEVING LEARNING OBJECTIVES IN AN ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

There seems to be a consensus in the academy that student learner objectives need not be changed, given a different delivery model. However, what naturally changes are the teaching strategies and learner activities. For example, a Marketing for Health Services course can keep the same student learner objectives, but the skill building strategies and ways of assessing student learning change from on-ground to online. Online students still present a new healthcare product or service as a marketing team, but they present their marketing plan or proposal using technology tools of the online environment. Learning objectives such as oral communication, negotiation and team building, professional socialization, and talent development have frequently been discussed as areas of concern for the virtual learning environment, especially among preparation programs for a well-recognized profession.

In the past, perceptions that online education was not able to create learning experiences to achieve these objectives created barriers within some accrediting bodies to consider an accreditation option for online programs. However, technology advancements and a decade of experience in instructional design innovation offers new insights into how these objectives can be achieved with rigor and excellence. A better understanding of these new opportunities may be achieved by starting with an inventory of the changes in digital assets over time, meaning a review of how technology and teaching strategies have evolved.

A macro review of the history of evaluating online education shows several distinct and natural phases of this diffusion of innovation within higher education (see Figure 3). The initial phase used questions on student course evaluations and questions by academic administrators and faculty to see if students learned almost “in spite of” the technology. In other words, we looked to see if the “technology worked” and if students “liked the online experience” as well as the on-ground experience, and if students would take another online course. A second phase focused on faculty to ensure that they had the proper training to use pedagogical strategies so students would learn and nothing would be sacrificed. A third major phase is the partnership between faculty and instructional designers (Chao, Saj, & Hamilton, 2012). Faculty recognized that in order to be more effective in their teaching, they needed to be open to assistance from skilled course developers who were more than “IT folks.” A fourth, and current phase, is harnessing the “limitless” possibilities that online learning technology brings to the academy.
Online learning technology has advanced in phases. These phases can be described in terms of progressive generations (Gibson & Bayek, 2009). Technology described as 1st generation in online teaching tended to be text heavy. With advancing innovation, technology takes teaching strategies to 2nd generation, which includes more visual aids and chunking of information. At this stage, course content and programs consider learning styles and self-directed process. Finally, 3rd generation uses strategies such as three- to five-minute clusters for reading, visual aids, and streaming. Community learning becomes an area of emphasis. Some of these types of digital assets are now provided by publishers while others are created internally. Students still want to interact with the subject matter expert. There is evidence that wide-open, self-paced Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have higher attrition (Managan, 2012). In the virtual environment, instructors need to use the personal touch and to create experiences that support and value community learning interactions. Building community in the virtual classroom setting is now possible and measurable.

Building community in an online learning environment is critical for a positive experience for both faculty and students. The online education community is based on successful strategies for building relationships and a sense of belonging just as would be expected in a traditional face-to-face setting. Intentional intervention by the instructor, described as “instructor modeling” by Vesely, Bloom,
and Sherlock (2007), has been considered the most important factor in building online community. Instructors can also provide this type of experience in extracurricular activities. Providing opportunities for graduate students to have a sense of cohesiveness as a group is an important aspect of graduate professional education, and the online environment offers unique ways to engage technology to develop connectedness (Mast, 2012). In fact, Mellon and Kester (2004) consider the successful establishment of a supportive community in the online environment as a necessity. However, in a recent editorial for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* Jenkins (2012) presents strong arguments that the emotional connections that are associated with successful persistence to degree completion are not really available to the virtual student. However, the dominance of social networking in our culture presents a credible counter perspective to Jenkins.

A closer look at how innovations in teaching strategies, learner theory, and use of technology offer quality learning experiences that can be assessed in terms of learning objectives includes specific examples from empirical studies and over a decade of outcomes data. In the following sections, specific aspects of the learning experiences, to include oral communication, negotiation and team building, professional socialization, and talent development are addressed. These learning experiences, previously perceived as only available to on-ground students, are addressed in terms of online teaching strategies to achieve competency in these learning outcomes.

**ORAL COMMUNICATION**

Hassan and Ibrahim (2012) clarify that learning strategies may be developed for encouraging students to utilize online communication such as conducting online discussions on specific topics. Students focus on cogent, high impact reflective writing rather than lengthy, often weighty, “papers.” Historically, oral communication has usually taken a back seat to written communication in most course assessments. On-ground graduate programs have been stronger in this area by using group projects and team presentations. There is more work to be done in both on-ground and online environments to improve formal presentation skills of students in health services administration. However, there are many options available in the online environment that offer the opportunity to teach and assess online communication. Online communications may take the form of text, but may also involve web conferencing or use of other technology that provides students and instructors to engage in oral communication experiences (e.g. BlackboardLearn’s use of WIMBA). Oral presentations may be delivered by students using voice-over power points (Bridges & Hanson, 2012) as a way to provide online faculty specific
methods for assessing and developing oral communication skills. Oral communication may be enhanced by the fact that online students put more thought into discussion board work (Marovich, 2012, Ward, Peters, & Shelley, 2012). Faculty members advise that a cogent, relevant, and meaningful online post could take thirty to forty minutes to prepare. Short, quick, and episodic posts have their value and place, but quality online learning favors the former approach. Rubrics and assessment methods for evaluating oral communication competencies that are used in on-ground courses work equally well when technology is used to capture students’ oral communications via webinar or other similar technologies.

NEGOTIATION AND TEAM BUILDING

Negotiation and team building are frequently highlighted as key learning outcomes in health administration programs. The online environment offers many opportunities to use specific course content, assignments, and instructional design to effectively teach and assess these competencies. For example, an interprofessional approach to healthcare is designed to develop a partnership among healthcare providers where knowledge and skills are shared in order to better achieve common goals (Bridges & Hanson, 2012). Students are educated in interprofessional collaboration and teamwork, and these competencies have been demonstrated within the online program environment using curriculum mapping to both university competencies and program specific competencies. Online learning has opened a new strategy to move the interprofessional education movement forward (Council on Social Work Education, 1998). Specific experiential assignments and teaching strategies were applied to assess learning outcomes related to team building. Gibson (2009) emphasized that many tools are available in course management software (i.e. Blackboard, D2L, etc.) and simulation technology to incorporate authentic team experiences. There are many instances where virtual spaces are increasingly used in industry for team projects and the online environment helps student develop team leadership and team participation skills. There is a growing body of research on the roles of virtual team leadership and interest in the specific roles virtual team managers need to adopt to effectively perform their jobs (Koivisto & Vartiainen, 2008).

Student learning online, at some level, mimics how the workplace is functioning today. This is a clear indication that virtual team leadership and negotiation skills are actually becoming a skill that employers will look to as a specific competency. Workers have access to technology that they are using even when distance is not a barrier. For better or worse, it is just how people work today. Undergraduate courses may have more opportunities to involve students in interprofessional
online courses. Also, programs situated in large colleges of health professions versus a “School of X” will naturally offer students more opportunities for varied interprofessional experiences.

With health systems growing in size, complexity, and geographic scope, mastery of virtual team leadership is a distinctive area of competency that online learning is best positioned to develop. Instructors can access the virtual team collaboration process of students by going into virtual team discussion boards and chats in order to provide both formative and summative feedback in virtual team space discussions. In fact, negotiation and team work content in online courses may have even more faculty oversight and student interaction because more “space” and time is open to them rather than being constrained by the obligatory assemblage of students during proscribed class time or the pressure to scurry to find an amenable on-ground meeting time for a group project.

PROFESSIONAL SOCIALIZATION

Professional socialization is a significant challenge for online learning. Paradoxically it is a challenge for on-ground programs as knowledge, skills, and competencies get much attention while “professionalism” is often relegated to the “soft skills.” One could argue that much needs to be done in this area for the health professional, including health services administration. Leadership development is certainly available to students in health services curricula—especially at the graduate level. Ethical reasoning is fast becoming a core competency in many programs. What about “professional socialization?” Are curriculum designers, academic administrators, faculty, and staff clear on how to operationalize professional socialization? It is fair to say that a dialogue about professionalism leads to a more subjective definition.

It may be difficult to define it or how we have students develop professional behavior, but it is usually clear when unprofessional behavior manifests itself. Unprofessional behavior manifests itself in online teaching and learning just as much as on-ground. Just as in traditional face-to-face programs, the faculty and student relationships that create positive learning and professional development opportunities are not limited only to the classroom. Professional preparation programs, colleges, and schools are already revising student codes of conduct policies to include online student behavior. Some are well ahead of the university at large (Anselmie, Glasgow, & Gambescia, 2013). Gibson (2009) states that professional socialization is widely used in simulations in the health sciences and aviation industries, among others. Such simulations are also available for use in courses. Lessons from industry reveal that organizations such as IBM use a virtual environment for executive and professional development (Hatch, 2007).

Are curriculum designers, academic administrators, faculty, and staff clear on how to operationalize professional socialization?
Learning in a simulation environment, such as that used for professional development, is best explained with consideration of cognitive psychology as a foundation. Bransford (2002) identifies the existence of an overlap of learning, assessment, knowledge, and community. There is a need to bridge modeling and learning through interactive visualization and embedding assessment throughout unobtrusive assessment (non-testing). Creating learning experiences to develop and assess professional socialization requires specific strategies and use of technology to achieve those unique objectives. As previously stated, these outcomes may be more difficult to measure due to the potential for subjectivity and absence of specific objectives identified in professional practice for health administration.

**TALENT DEVELOPMENT**

Talent development is a concept originating from the human resource management discipline as it relates to aligning training and education with business objectives. This is an emerging field of study with limited evidence of assessment measures or best practices. Paradoxically, the human resources field has been replacing “qualifications and experiences” with “competencies.” Professional preparation programs are quite familiar with the identification and assessment of competencies among workers. Current literature is scant and fragmented (Garavan, Carbery, & Rock, 2012). This is an aspect of higher education that has received increasing attention because employment upon graduation could be considered an indirect measure of talent development. Exemplary health services administration programs can demonstrate effectiveness in this area in several ways: employment of graduates, employer surveys with regard to how well recent graduates meet expected competency levels, and effective use of advisory boards.

Talent development is equally important to on-ground and online programs and requires administrative and faculty commitment in either case. Faculty advisors and mentors who are available to students to encourage membership in professional organizations, networking opportunities, and disseminations of internship or fellowship opportunities can be very effective in webinar or virtual environments (Mast, 2012). This mirrors actual practice in the workforce where professionals may work with mentors or others via phone or other distance communications. For online programs, it is a matter of establishing and maintaining nationwide and worldwide (if part of the program’s mission) employer and community relationships, and ensuring effective methods of collecting and reporting employment outcomes of graduates and alumni.

Achieving objectives in these areas requires intentional survey data collection and assessment of graduate and alumni outcomes based on established standards.
and criteria. Current trend analysis from the Sloan Consortium (2009) indicates that concerns from potential employers are rare. The advent of the ePortfolio has dramatically changed the ways that workers demonstrate talent. Online programs are generally ahead of on-ground programs in use of ePortfolios. The ePortfolio easily became a favorite method used in the tenure and promotion process of the academy.

**Framework for Expanding Evidence-Based Quality Assessment Processes in Online Environment**

An expanded framework of evidence-based quality assessment processes for online programs requires clearly defined criteria as the foundation. Accrediting agencies set online assessment policies based on evidence that assessment processes are in place. With regard to accrediting bodies, one document, “Guidelines for the Evaluation of Distance Education (On-line Learning),” is the most frequently cited among regional accreditors. It lists nine hallmarks, or criteria, of quality for distance education:

- Online learning is appropriate to the institution’s mission and purpose.
- The institution’s plans for developing and sustaining and—if appropriate—expanding online learning is integrated into its regular planning and evaluation process.
- Online learning is incorporated into the institution’s systems of governance and academic oversight.
- Curricula for the institution’s online learning offerings are coherent, cohesive, and comparable in academic rigor to programs offered in traditional formats.
- The institution evaluates the effectiveness of its online learning offerings, including the extent to which the online learning goals are achieved, and uses the results of its evaluation to enhance the attainment of goals.
- Faculty responsible for delivery of online learning curricula and evaluating the students’ success in achieving online learning goals are appropriately qualified and effectively supported.
- The institution provides effective student and academic services to support students enrolled in online learning offerings.
- The institution provides sufficient resources to support, and if appropriate, expand its online learning offerings.
- The institution assures the integrity of its online learning offerings (Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, 2009).

In addition to the guidelines adopted by regional accreditors, there are a number of models for best practices in online education which have been widely used,
such as *Quality Matters Rubric* (Quality Matters, 2011) and the *Quality Scorecard for the Administration of Online Education Programs* (Sloan-C, 2009). These are two excellent examples that offer consistent methods of evaluating and improving quality of online education programs (Shelton, 2012). Simply proving that an online program is “as good as” the on-ground program should be avoided. It is important to consider that online teaching leaves a footprint where department chairs and deans can review classes while in progress where all instructor and student activity can be readily seen. It can be argued that this is, in fact, a strength of quality assessment in terms of efficiency and practicality that is not available in on-ground programs (Yang, 2005 & McLoughlin, 2007).

The key elements of a comprehensive framework for quality assessment must include evidence of institutional and administrative support, student competency assessment, student-centered curriculum, and assessment of faculty roles, competencies, and support, as well as standards for instructional design. Discussion of these elements follows.

**ASSESSMENT OF FACULTY ROLES**

A recent comprehensive Distance Education Report including an edited collection of brief reports that presented issues, trends, and best practices for faculty development for online teaching was presented in *Faculty Focus* (Hill C. E., 2005). Quality assessment must identify potential barriers to faculty support of online including inconsistent technology infrastructure and absence of adequate training. Recurring themes include elements of faculty certification programs and training best practices such as a “faculty playground” where new instructors can try out new tools, access successful sample courses, and receive a formal orientation including an asynchronous training course (Yang, 2005).

Six years of Sloan Consortium data indicate faculty acceptance of online education as a barrier to widespread adoption (Sloan-C, 2009). Faculty attitudes are critical to adoption. Barriers to acceptance generally relate to misaligned incentives from administration and inadequate resources such as preparation time to develop online courses, technology, and limited prestige and recognition for online teaching. Sloan reports (2009) reveal that a majority of faculty believe learning outcomes are equal to or better than face-to-face. In addition, 64 percent of faculty members say it takes somewhat more or a lot more effort to teach online. Eighty-five percent say online course development takes somewhat more or a lot more effort than face-to-face courses. A more in-depth discussion of faculty support and competencies for online teaching is addressed in the next section.
INSTITUTIONAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

Senior management needs to create an environment for success and leadership. Expanded assessment of online programs includes methods to answer the following questions: Is online education part of the fabric of the institution? Is there a strategic approach to online education? Is there a central support for policy and procedure? Administrative structures of online programs have been consistently identified as a key component for quality online program delivery (Paolucci & Gambescia, 2009). In a study of 239 universities that identified the range of general administrative structures currently in use, a typology was developed by Paolucci & Gambescia (2009) to examine the types of administrative structures where online degree programs are supported. These include academic department, continuing professional education studies unit, distance education unit, consortium, alliance, and outsourced. Findings included that 90 percent of these programs used internal administrative structures while only 10 percent used external administrative structures such as a consortium or alliance or fully outsourced. Trends in the late 1990s and early 2000s indicate an increasing shift to more administrative support from a centralized Distance Education Unit. The high percentage of schools keeping curriculum and key administrative duties within the “mainstream” academic department is most likely pleasing to faculty bodies, and they would rate the Department Administrative Structure as highest in fidelity for academic quality. Since 2004, there is a trend toward shifting back to the Department Administrative Unit.

Sloan-C (2009) categorizes institutions that offer online programs as Non-Strategic, Engaged, or Fully Engaged. More than one third of faculty members at public institutions have taught online with 25 percent teaching fully online courses. The majority of faculty has 20 years of experience, with 27.6 percent of online courses taught by non-tenure track and 21 percent by tenure track faculty.

STUDENT COMPETENCY ASSESSMENT

CHEA recognizes that corporations and employers demand outcomes to confirm that prospective employees possess carefully delineated job skills. Competencies have been found to be a useful framework. Lack of face-to-face contact invites use of proximal assessment measures that may not be necessary in on-ground classes. There are many sophisticated and reliable sources of assessment data available for both formative and summative assessment of student competency attainment. The level of adoption of a variety of assessment rubrics and data analysis within an online program provides a useful quality benchmark. Processes of rubrics, data collection, metadata analysis, and subsequent quality improvement initia-
atives based on the data are powerful assessment processes. There is an emerging body of science related to the power of data mining and e-content metadata analysis (Waggoner, 2012). E-content metadata is information that is available about student use of e-content. This allows faculty to identify areas of content that students may be struggling with so that course modifications and student tutoring or support can be offered. Course learning objectives must be mapped to program competencies as part of the process (Bridges & Hanson, 2012).

The overall approach to course content development is a key consideration in expanded assessment processes. In some institutions, the approach to course development may be what Hill describes as “ad hoc,” where individual faculty create and delivery their own unique course (Hill, 2012). This ad hoc approach, similar to traditional course delivery in brick and mortar settings, offers benefits of higher potential for innovation but also has limitations in terms of consistent approach to student competency. Alternatively, many fully online programs use a system where there is a master course developed by subject matter experts and instructional designers. These courses are then delivered typically by adjunct instructors (Hill, 2012). The degree to which the master course delivery model is adopted is one of the biggest differentiators between traditional and online programs as well as non-profit and for-profit models in some cases. The master course model creates a new perspective on ownership of the course that is an organizational culture shift. The degree to which this type of model is adopted is important to understand as part of expanded assessment in order to focus on processes that assure quality of content and innovation remains central to delivery and does not take a back seat to operational efficiency. The concept of unbundling the faculty role from one of providing all aspects of the curriculum and course, to focusing on areas of expertise and student need has been taking place in higher education for some years. For example, accelerated programs used a centralized curriculum early on, allowing for more course offerings to more places to reach students who would otherwise not be able to attend in the traditional “day” format. It is reasonable to expect that online delivery will accelerate this unbundling of the faculty role.

**STUDENT-CENTERED CURRICULUM**

Assessment of student satisfaction and learner preference is a key benchmark in expanded assessment processes. Yang (2005) emphasizes that online education will be quality when it is student-centered and when it includes the following ingredients:
• knowledge is constructed;
• students take full responsibility for learning;
• students are motivated;
• course provides “mental white space” for reflection;
• activities match learning styles;
• experiential learning assignments augment web content;
• solitary and interpersonal activities are interspersed;
• inaccurate prior learning is identified and corrected;
• “spiral learning” provides revisiting and expanding on prior lessons; and
• a master teacher is able to guide overall process.

This translates into outcomes assessment-centered on constructivist learning theory, and incorporating specific course content and assignments that include reflection and experiential opportunities. Course design should reflect a variety of technology tools and content styles to accommodate a variety of learning styles and preferences. As an indirect measure of quality in the online environment, evidence should be examined with regard to the extent to which administration supports limits on enrollment in online courses to ensure appropriate levels of communication are feasible. In some instances, institutions are demanding implementation of online learning environments without having the staff component to support online pedagogy (Sims, 2002).

It is critical that online development projects implement quality control processes to ensure students’ collaborative discourse. Proactive evaluation includes the need to provide support (scaffolding) for planning and creating online materials beginning with the production phase to plan for specific and appropriate assessment. Evidence based assessment requires consideration of student learning styles. The work of Lu, Gia, Gong & Clark (2007) in this area used Kolb learning styles, or Kolb Learning Style Inventory (KSLI) as a foundation to develop quality online course delivery. They studied how a student perceives and processes information, including experiential assignments, and they found that there was a significant effect of learning styles on total reading time and total discussion time in online courses (Lu, et al., 2007).

Based on their two dimensional scale of “convergers and assimilators” (abstract/conceptualization) and “divergers and accommodators” (concrete experience), convergers and assimilators spent more time on online reading and divergers and accommodators spent more time in online discussions and showed more orientation toward peers who act as consultants. It is clear that an understanding of the impact of learning styles helps to inform methods for engagement in a course. Surprisingly to Lu and colleagues, however, learning styles had no effect on learning.
outcomes. Their research highlights the importance of careful selection of content and delivery methods to accommodate a variety of learning styles. Additionally, the research of Fearing (2011) indicated that learning preferences change with age, experience and maturity. It is recommended that assessing learners at beginning of program is an ideal practice. Key elements to any student-centered approach to online teaching includes: active learning strategies, ongoing communication, timely and constructive feedback and good organization of course materials.

Understanding the student experience requires an examination of technology from the student perspective. Expanded quality assessment requires a focus on teaching effectiveness and how technology either enhances or degrades the learning experience (Kilgore, 2004). Research has shown conclusively that instructional design is correlated to student learning. However, technology itself has little influence. Course management software tends to support more of a behaviorist approach to teaching, yet adult learning has instructional design-grounded in social constructivism where meaning occurs through interaction with other students, the instructor and the environment. Faculty may be concerned that online teaching does not support the constructivist model. However, it is also argued that constructivism can be employed online if it is done with intention within the course design.

Student-centered curriculum also includes student accountability. One of the key areas of student accountability in online programs is academic honesty. It has been suggested (Jocoy, 2009) that plagiarism is more a need to educate on how to appreciate the development of knowledge. Detecting and combating plagiarism in the online environment remains a concern for instructors and administrators. The Council of Writing Program Administrators presents several contingencies that may create difficulties when attempting to enforce academic integrity policy: intentionality (errors made in haste or mismatch of citation); degree of culpability; copying language (i.e. direct word for word quotes or poor paraphrasing). Perceived risk of detection may fail to recognize relevance of the rights of others, yet can be molded in moral development through the enforcement of rules established. Studies specific to rates of plagiarism range from 3 to 21 percent based on using commercially available technology. Instructors ability to detect plagiarism has really only improved significantly in the past decade. Empirical evidence shows that use of an academic integrity quiz or communication of expectations does not significantly reduce plagiarism. It is more a moral development issue that spans all learning environments, both online and face-to-face. Academic integrity also includes assurances that the student completing the online work is actually the student who is enrolled and will earn the grade.
or degree. There are services available on the internet to have a “ghost” student do your online coursework for you for a fee. Shocking as this sounds, it is really a variation on an age old theme of cheating that may occur regardless of setting. For example, having someone else sit for an exam in a lecture hall is an issue in an on-ground class. Academic dishonesty must be combated through meaningful and enforced policy. In the online environment this requires use of visual connections and application of technology to identify students accurately with secure passwords, photo ID links, and other means.

There has been some discussion with regard to differentiation for online programs for undergraduate versus graduate students. The following sections provide more in-depth consideration of the online environment for these two distinct student populations.

**UNDERGRADUATE**

Within the undergraduate arena, community colleges were earliest adopters of online. Ninety-two percent of community colleges were engaged in online in 2001-2002 (Milan, 2004). Challenges have emerged in assessing developmental, critical and reflective dimensions of online—particularly for undergraduates with little or no work experience as a foundation. In fact, Sherrill (2010) discovered that undergraduate students may prefer, and perform better, with instructor-based direction. This suggests implications for application of appropriate technology tools. However, Sherrill also reports that some studies indicate more retention after six months in undergraduate online courses (age, previous experience with online may confound results).

An empirical study of online versus traditional students in an undergraduate personal finance class with pre-test/post-test and control for variables like ACT, GPA, gender, and major found no significant differences in student outcomes (Ary, 2011). Interestingly, Ary’s study also found that students with higher GPA selected the online option for the course (2011). A broader literature review did not identify significant differences in other empirical studies including Principles of Marketing, Microeconomics, and in Macroeconomics, online students performed significantly better (Ary, 2011). SRI International was commissioned by US Department of Education, and they examined 1000 empirical studies comparing online and ground class performance from 1996-2008 (US Department of Education Office of Postsecondary Education, 2006). The examination contrasted online versus ground condition; measured student learning outcomes; used rigorous research design; used adequate information to calculate an effect size. Only 45 studies met the criteria, and a small but significant difference was
found: online students scored in the 59th percentile and ground students scored in the 50th percentile. More importantly, the combination of instruction (i.e. hybrid courses combining online and on-ground components) produced best results (US Department of Education Office of Postsecondary Education, 2006).

Additionally, a study of undergraduate students in “Managing Health Services Organizations” found no difference in learning outcomes between face-to-face and online, but students expressed preference for immediate feedback in a face-to-face environment. Positive impressions of online technology improved with experience (Sherrill, 2010). Outcomes improved with additional support content. While contrasting on-ground and online undergraduate course delivery, it is important to consider that traditional undergraduate courses historically may have been assessed on a midterm and a final in a 400 seat auditorium (Carey, 2012), and this also presents issues with regard to quality. In terms of any specific requirements for a certain number of hours of physical face-to-face course delivery, empirical evidence does not support it.

There is substantial concern with regard to course design and teaching expertise that is critical in the undergraduate environment to ensure student motivation, engagement, and learning (without prior work experiences to draw upon). Therefore, the more important quality measure is not a required number of hours of face-to-face course delivery, but rather a comprehensive assessment of instructional design and faculty credentials to address the learning styles and needs of the undergraduate student population in an online environment.

**GRADUATE**

Graduate education requires the additional dimension of creating an environment for professional engagement and development of professional relationships that prepares students for becoming part of a professional group. These relationships are often initially available to students through professional organizations and societies specific to their professional programs (Glazer-Raymo, 2005; Guentzel & Nesheim, 2006). To address the relationship dilemma in online programs, extracurricular events in a virtual environment offer opportunities for students to reflect on their personal growth and learning in ways that encourage students to relate to each other and to the faculty outside the structured format of course content. Faculty members play a key role in identifying and implementing such extracurricular activities to provide a complete university experience for online students.

Adult educators are often concerned that the online environment may not support the social constructivism required for effective adult teaching strategies...
Assessing Online Education and Accreditation in HCM

(Kilgore, 2004). Technology has advanced to a point that student groups can easily be developed using threaded discussions and team structures to facilitate a collaborative learning process and knowledge construction. Online discussion boards offer excellent opportunities for peer collaboration and interactions where classmates can build on their previous work experience and share their perspectives with classmates.

Graduate students have been identified as more appropriate for online learning due to their more focused approach to learning as a way to advance their existing career path. It is assumed that graduate students will be more likely to be working, and that the flexibility of online programs is attractive to accommodate work and family demands.

CURRENT TRENDS AND IMPLICATIONS

One regional accreditor, Western Association of Schools and Colleges, recently set an example that other regional accreditors may follow. It rejected an application from Bridgepoint Education, a proprietary institution. With new headquarters in San Diego, but anchored in Iowa at Ashford University, the former home of Franciscan University on the Prairies, Bridgeport was looking to revamp its image. Among the reasons given for why they were turned down include: paucity of faculty and the fact that 128,000 of 240,000 students had dropped out over the last five years. The level of attrition was a concern. What had even greater impact was the fact that WASC posted the rejection letter on the internet for the world to see. Accreditors have traditionally been less transparent…especially with bad news. It will be interesting to observe whether other regional accreditors will follow WASC’s lead.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FACULTY DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES FOR ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

In his latest book, Mobile Wave, Saylor (2012) predicts that classroom teachers won’t disappear, but there will be fewer of them and they will have new roles acting more as guides and facilitators than lecturers. Faculty who can grasp and marshal the full dimensions of mobile education to engage learners may change teaching criteria in fundamental ways. Milam, Voorhees, and Bedard-Voorhees (2004) present key trends with regard to changing faculty roles as follows: shifting to facilitation, chunking material for online courses, and defining learning outcomes and application of learning. In terms of assessment, as previously discussed, ePortfolios are important, and may require additional faculty training and support to integrate them into the curriculum. Portfolios provide evaluative
and consultative feedback with continuous internal and external communication. Student engagement is a function of course design, and faculty proficiency in building community is central to successful engagement. Faculty need a foundation of clear methods for evaluating online discussions with clear faculty expectations communicated to the student.

Faculty development is needed, and should be examined in an expanded assessment of quality. Currently faculty members are inconsistently informed on learning theory, instructional design, and practical aspects of online teaching (Milam, et al. 2004). Further, adjunct instructors, many who have not earned doctoral degrees, are teaching outside formal faculty structures that include oversight of instructional course quality (Yang, 2005). Online learning offers opportunities for critical thinking, deep learning, collaborative learning, and problem solving, and faculty need support to develop and design online materials to facilitate these objectives. Interestingly, many faculty members have discussed the advantage of the bias-free teaching environment that online courses offer.

Faculty members identify several challenges with regard to online teaching. These include lack of prestige, change in faculty role, and lack of monetary support. Empirical evidence indicates variation among instructors is associated with student motivation, enjoyment, and learning. The role of faculty is coach and mentor. An in-depth study of over 10,000 faculty responses indicates that faculty members are increasingly engaged in online learning, yet dissatisfied with support and incentives offered by their institutions. Support for online course, course development and delivery, policies on intellectual property, and recognition in tenure and promotion are ranked “below average.” Only technology support was rated “average” (Sloan-C, 2009).

Faculty development is needed to use different interaction methods such as those required online to develop and maintain relationships. Additionally, online teaching requires training on how to give negative feedback and how to offer encouragement as well as how to deal with disruptive students in a setting that is “permanent/forever.” It is a very different communication style than in an on-ground classroom. Further, faculty development is needed in terms of approaches to address academic integrity concerns. Testing online and assessing learning requires new strategies and techniques. Faculty need to know how to assess learner preferences.

Attitudes toward technology, teaching styles, and control of technology are a common area of concern expressed by faculty. Factors that impact faculty attitudes include: prior experience online; monetary support or promotion/tenure; improved training and facilities; and availability of appropriate online courseware.
Faculty members need training on technology, and how to design interactive assignments/activities and course syllabi. Training before teaching online is crucial. As a final step, evidence of faculty self-assessment processes is an important consideration. Based on a “firm foundation of robust growth in online programs, faculty engagement, and student demand.” Frank Mayadas, program director at Sloan, emphasizes that the challenge will be to engage more faculty to adopt and develop high quality online educational offerings (2011).

**Summary and Specific Recommendations Based on Evidence Presented**

In summary, evidence exists from multiple and compelling sources that online education will grow in higher education (Marovich, 2012, Jenkins, 2012, Allen & Seaman, 2007, Sloan-C, 2010, Waggoner, 2012). The question remains, how much of the traditional on-ground education will move to online, regardless of growth in enrollment? Some forecasts show that it is significant. Online learning may not be a good match for all students, just as some students are a better fit at small institutions where others thrive at large institutions. While teaching and learning can be anytime and anywhere, this does not mean online learning is for “everyone” (Gambescia, 2007). Choice of programs is ultimately the prospective student’s prerogative based on personal preferences, financial considerations, geographic limitations, and other factors. Effective accreditation must focus on quality of programs as opposed to prescriptive mandates of what type of program is “best” for any given student. CAHME and other accreditors recognize this already by emphasizing the unique aspects of programs based on institutional and program mission. Each stakeholder group has its value-added contribution and sphere of influence in the quality assessment process (Gambescia, 2006; updated 2012).

Accreditors do have a responsibility to provide guidance to students and other stakeholders regarding the quality of higher education programs. Some factors can be equated with quality and others cannot. For example, retention cannot be directly equated to student learning. However, comprehensive assessment of student satisfaction is essential. Red flags include institutions suspected of moving into online programs as an administrative cash cow. Quality online programs need to offer supporting evidence of the connection to institutional mission and strategy.

The debate on whether online is inferior, the same, or even superior to land-based is passé. The better debate would be to focus on the differences between two approaches to teaching and learning and how learning outcomes are impacted. Online education is clearly different and that difference needs to be recognized
in the review process. However, academic fidelity is a crucial factor in evaluating online education as it would be for any new academic enterprise. Examples of online program successes and challenges highlight that the leadership of presidents and provosts is key to successful integration of online into institutions.

The motivation for “moving online” comes from a number of influences including revenue generation, expanding the mission of the college, allure of entrepreneurship, and simply because students ask for it. In answering these questions of motivation and influence, it is in the rationale that the college or academic program needs to be true to its academic fidelity. This is a fundamental precept and, in the end, one that portends success of the new program offering. Academic fidelity is the extent or level to which university leaders have considered, involved and entrusted the current academic assets to produce the new educational offering. It is not simply comparing on-ground to online, i.e. one needs to “look like the other,” but assessing whether the educational offering is truly equivalent to the quality and standards of the institution. Thus, a review of the gestation of an online offering is critical in understanding its academic fidelity. Important questions arise from this review process:

- Has the program followed the traditional shared governance pathways?
- Are the faculty competent and an integral part of the department or college regardless of “where they sit?”
- Does the program have strong leadership? Are appropriate resources available to faculty and students?
- Are student outcomes examined?

These questions should follow the new program offering through its lifecycle from first innovative offering to a reasonable planned obsolescence.

At some level the questions above are really no different than questions asked for quality assurance purposes of on-ground educational offerings. One should recognize that the context of the questions is different, given that online education, by design, is different. However differences should not be fundamental in nature such as the purpose, goal, learner objectives, competencies, and impact of the degree offering for students. Academic programs need not be faced with an either/or decision in the discernment to launch online program offerings. The rationale requires consideration and input from the several stakeholders. Therefore, the rationale to move online is made up of the confluence of interests from stakeholders. Each stakeholder group should be considerate, and sometimes patient, of the other to ensure a quality assurance system that is both effective and efficient in carrying out its purpose and objectives, the most important of which are student learning outcomes and ideally positive impact to society. And,
finally, each stakeholder group must also be reflective in examining its relevant contribution to the educational enterprise.

In terms of *sphere of influence*, key stakeholders have addressed both challenges and opportunities for the future of online higher education. Extensive research over the past decade highlights that orientation and training of online faculty has generally been woefully inadequate. However, faculty may be somewhat forgiving as the online revolution has been truly disruptive. Most employers will be open to online learning as they are facing the same challenges to efficiently and effectively prepare the workforce for a new economy. Many academic departments will offer online degree options for students regardless of accreditation. Competition for online programs will increase in intensity in view of the many types of IHE entering the online marketplace. Accrediting organizations recognize that they have an obligation to the many stakeholders to commit the necessary resources to establish an unbiased process for accrediting online programs. Accreditation plays a critical role in assurance of quality for online programs that is essential to serve the needs of students and key stakeholders.

There are multiple models, benchmarks, standards, strategies, and pillars that have been developed that may be adopted by any accrediting body for a particular profession, including health administration. It is a matter of selecting one that is the best fit for the accrediting body to implement, and then moving forward with a process for accreditation of online programs using fully prepared review teams.

The goal of educational accreditation, whether national, regional, or discipline specific is to ensure that education provided by an institution meets acceptable levels of quality according to the entity making the assessment. It is expected that accrediting bodies be circumspect of changes in higher education, especially in those high stake professions where public health and welfare are affected.

Distance education is a major innovation in higher education. It has great potential to democratize higher education once education can take place anytime and anywhere. And programs offering students the ability to obtain a graduate degree while remaining in their current job and continuing to live at home with their family are in high demand. The field must assess whether or not it is incumbent upon accreditors to ensure that students entering online degree programs can be assured of a high quality education to the same extent that those who have the ability to attend on-ground programs are.

This white paper is intended to serve as a starting point for a healthy dialogue regarding online education in the field of healthcare management education. Comprehensive quality assurance of teaching and learning is a process of ongoing
review, discussion, quality improvement, and capacity building actions among all stakeholders. These stakeholders include accrediting bodies, providers, and administrators of the higher education enterprise, students, professionals and their associations, employers, and the general public.

REFERENCES


Cao, I. T. (2012). Quality and growth implications of incremental costing models for distance education units. In R. Paolucci, Quality Assurance of Online and Distance Learning (pp. 61-81). The Interlearning Company, LLC.


Friedman, L. (2012, August 28). Professor and Director, Master of Health Services Administration Program at The George Washington University. (L. Mast, Interviewer)


Guentzel, M. N. (Fall 2006). Supporting graduate and professional students: The role of student affairs. New Directions for Student Services, No. 115.


Inglis, A. (2005). Quality improvement, quality assurance, and benchmarking: Comparing two frameworks for managing quality processes in open and distance learning. The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, Vol. 6 (1).


McFarlane, D. (2012). The leadership role of distance learning administrators in increasing educational value and quality perception. In R. E. Paolucci, Quality Assurance of Online and Distance Learning (pp. 9-21). The Interlearning Company, LLC.


Neuberger, B. (2012, September 19). Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, UIC School of Public Health. (L. Mast, Interviewer)


Paolucci, R. (2012). Quality Assurance of Online and Distance Learning. The Interlearning Company, LLC.


Shelton, K. &. (2011). Quality Scorecard for the Administration of Online Programs: A work in Progress. SLOAN-C.


SLOAN-C. (2009). Strong faculty engagement in online learning APLU reports. SLOAN-C.


