Evaluating Online Programs Using a BSC Approach

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INTRODUCTION

Accountability pressures on higher education have increased in recent decades (Dill, 1999; Garvin, 2000; Jacob & Hellström, 2003). Pressure for financial accountability stacks up alongside pressures to assess student learning outcomes. Student satisfaction has always been a factor in institutional success, but added mobility and growth in the for-profit educational market have increased the impact of student satisfaction. Further, citizens, parents of students, alumni, taxpayers, and, for the for-profit institutions, shareholders constitute powerful external forces.

Online programs sit in a special spot in these pressures. As relatively new entrants in the educational repertoire, questions about quality of instruction and learning share center stage with questions about costs (The Learning Alliance, 2004). Online programs require an investment in technology, staff, course development, and marketing. Many campus stakeholders doubt that such investments will produce high-quality instruction and significant student learning. Even some early adopters are now starting to question the role of online learning (The Learning Alliance, 2004).

A recent Sloan-C™ survey of chief academic affairs officers at degree-granting institutions in the U.S. demonstrates both the divide and the changing nature of the debate on the quality of online education (Allen & Seaman, 2003). While only 12.3% of respondents feel that online education is currently superior to face-to-face education, 44.9% believe that learning outcomes are the same. The remainder, 42.8% or almost half, believes that online learning outcomes are currently inferior to face-to-face learning outcomes. However, the percentage of those who believe that online learning outcomes will be inferior to face-to-face outcomes in three years drops to 25.2%, "a sea change in the perception of the quality of online learning" (Allen & Seaman, 2003, p. 13). Interestingly, in spite of the differences in perceptions of quality, Allen and Seaman report that a total of 66.8% of all respondents state that online education is critical to long-term strategy. The great majority (85.7%) of public institutions believe that online learning is a critical element of long-term strategy.

Given the accountability pressures and the long-term strategic importance of online learning, how should institutions of higher education evaluate online programs? A robust framework seems necessary to handle the variety of interests affecting online learning. The Sloan-C™ framework of five elements or pillars of quality (Moore, 2002) is arguably the best-known framework, and its comprehensive nature lends itself to robust evaluation. With several years of use and study, the Sloan-C™ framework has what is probably the best researched as well. Yet, other frameworks exist, not the least of which is that posed by post-secondary accrediting bodies (North Central Association Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, 2000). The Pew project on redesigning courses has also provided important insight into what makes for quality teaching and learning (Twigg, 2004).

A robust, yet comprehensible evaluation methodology that acknowledges the multiple perspectives held by many different stakeholders is also needed to encompass the complex tapestry of online learning within the wide variety of institutions and consortia involved in online learning. The Balanced Scorecard (BSC), first described by Kaplan and Norton (1992), has the potential to be just such a methodology. A strategic management tool organized around four distinct perspectives (financial, customer, internal, and innovation and learning), the BSC provides a balance "between short- and long-term objectives, between financial and non-financial measures, between lagging and leading indicators, and between external and internal performance perspectives" (Kaplan & Norton, 1996, p. viii). First developed for for-profit organizations, the BSC has since become a tool for government and not-for-profit organizations as well (Rohm, n.d.).

This article discusses the currently separate streams of evaluating online programs and the BSC, and then

brings the streams together by proposing a BSC for evaluating online programs.

For purposes of this article, an online program is defined as that portion of distance education offered over the Internet by an accredited educational institution.

Distance education is defined, for the purposes of accreditation review, as a formal educational process in which the majority of the instruction occurs when student and instructor are not in the same place. Instruction may be synchronous or asynchronous. (Higher Learning Commission, 2000, p. 1)

An online program could be synchronous (same time) or asynchronous (different times), but it is always offered over the Internet at a distance with students and instructors in different places. Note that the focus in this definition is on the program as a whole, rather than on the individual courses that constitute the program.

The BSC is defined as a tool that reflects "a carefully selected set of measures derived from an organization's strategy" (Niven, 2002, p. 12). These measures reflect the four to five perspectives that an organization judges to be critical to achieve its mission and strategic objectives.

ONLINE PROGRAM QUALITY

The North Central Association's Higher Learning Commission (HLC) guidelines for evaluation and assessment of distance learning suggest three indicators of program quality: student success, comparability to campus-based programs, and integrity of student work and credibility of the degrees and credits (North Central Association Commission of Institutions of Higher Education, 2000). While not listed in the evaluation and assessment area, other HLC guidelines stress the importance of curriculum and instruction, library and learning resources, student services, and facilities and finance.

By implication, the Pew Grant Program in Course Redesign (Center for Academic Transformation, n.d.) suggests two criteria for evaluation of an online program: enhancing student learning and reducing costs. Pew looks at other factors in its redesign approach: impact on significant numbers of students, student retention, and quality enhancements (continuous assessment and feedback, increased interaction among students, online tutorials, undergraduate learning assistants, individualize, on-demand support, and structural supports that ensure engagement and progress) (Twigg, 2004).

The Sloan-C™model of quality in online programs proposes five elements or pillars for evaluation of online programs. The model's premise is that quality online programs should bring about access, student satisfaction, faculty satisfaction, cost effectiveness, and learning. These five elements or pillars are highly interdependent (Benke, Bishop, Thompson, Scarafiotti, & Schweber, 2003; Moore, 2002).

Each of the pillars has its own stated goal and core question (Moore, 2002; see Table 1).

Table 1. The five pillars of the Sloan-C™ framework

Pillar	Goal	Associated Question
Learning Effectiveness	The quality of online learning is demonstrated to be at least as good as the quality the institution provides in traditional programs.	What has the institution learned about how well learning takes place?
Cost effectiveness	The institution continuously improves service while reducing costs.	Is there sufficient motivation for the institution to scale up online education?
Access	All learners who wish can access learning in a wide array of programs and courses.	To what extent has the interactive model increased access to quality education, beyond what would have been possible through the established methods of distributing self-learning materials?
Faculty Satisfaction	Faculty are pleased with teaching online, citing appreciation and happiness.	What has the institution learned about how easy (difficult) it is for faculty to develop and teach online courses?
Student Satisfaction	Students are pleased with their experiences in online learning, including interaction with instructors and peers, learning outcomes that match expectation, services, and orientation.	What has been learned about overall satisfaction of enrolled students?