Evaluating Online Programs

Kathleen D. Kelsey
Oklahoma State University, USA

James R. Lindner
Texas A&M University, USA

Kim E. Dooley
Texas A&M University, USA

USING BEST PRACTICES AS A STANDARD FOR PROGRAM EVALUATION

Systematic formative and summative evaluation of distance education programs is necessary for program improvement and accountability. The most frequently cited reference for best practices comes from the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE). WICHE (1997) has published a number of documents, including *Good Practices in Distance Education* (WCET, 1997, Publication Number 2A299). *Principles of Good Practice* was also developed by the Southern Region Education Board (SREB) (2003) to assess program quality. Both WICHE and SREB offer the following principles for best practices in distance education: curriculum and instruction; institutional context and commitment; and evaluation and assessment.

Law, Hawkes, and Murphy (2002) have outlined the general concerns within each category that should be considered in developing an instrument for measuring quality in a distance education program. These concerns are outlined in Table 1.

Given the variety of distance education programs available today, from offering one course to an entire degree program, program planners should not adopt a standardized instrument to use for evaluating their program. Rather, they should consider the best practices literature as a guide to developing an evaluation plan that addresses the unique context and setting for their distance education program (Law et al., 2002).

Best practices for distance education are provided as a guide and can be used as a gold standard for evaluating programs. The underlying question to ask when designing an evaluation should be: Is this particular standard relevant to your program? If so, to what degree of quality should it be operationalized?

If the standard is not present in your program, then ask why not? Not every program will have every best practice, as not all practices are appropriate for all programs. The evaluator's role is to make a salient argument for inclusion or exclusion of best practices given each unique program.

Table 1. Considerations for measuring quality in a distance education program

Consistency of program with institutional mission	Evaluators should look for evidence that offering distance education is in line with the institutional mission, and is well supported with adequate budgets and support staff.
Provisions for program oversight and accountability	Academic and technical oversight should be obvious to evaluators.
Provision of student support	Evaluators should examine Web sites and other media to ensure that students have access to all the required contexts for learning online.
Implementation of evaluation and assessment measures	Evaluation is a critical component of an excellent distance education program and should not be an afterthought, but rather incorporated into the planning phase of the program from inception.

EVALUATION MODELS

The Context, Input, Process, and Product (CIPP) model developed by Stufflebeam (1973) includes four phases of evaluation. Phase one is Context centered and addresses the questions of: Where is your program now? What are your program's needs? And where do you want your program to be? Phase two is Input centered and asks the questions: How will you get where you want to be? What resources are required to drive your program? Phase three concerns the Process and asks: How are you going to achieve your program goals? Phase four is Product focused and asks: Has your program achieved its goals and what are the outcomes?.

The CIPP model was developed during the early years of the program evaluation discipline and has been refined several times by various authors. Theory-driven evaluation was developed by Chen (1990) over the next decade and indirectly explains the context as the program's *implementation environment*, the input as the program's *treatment*, the process as the program's *intervening mechanisms*, and the product as the *outcomes* of the program. Chen asks evaluators and program stakeholders to reflect on the cause-and-effect mechanisms for each program. What are the causal elements that drive behavior change (learning in the case of distance education) and what are the effects, or outcomes, of the program's treatments (teaching, assignments, student-faculty interactions)?

Boulmetis and Dutwin (2000, p. 70) suggest a seven-step approach for conducting evaluation: (1) determine evaluation questions; (2) develop the evaluation design; (3) collect data; (4) analyze data; (5) draw conclusions from data; (6) make decisions on a program's efficiency, effectiveness, and impact; and (7) report to stakeholders. While this is a sound design, an evaluation that includes stakeholders in all steps will increase the likelihood that the results will be eagerly read and acted upon by program planners and decision makers.

Regardless of the evaluation model chosen for evaluating the program, stakeholders should remain at the center of all processes. Stakeholders are those people who care about your program, including students (beneficiaries), instructors, program planners, decision makers, technicians, and funders (agents). Another category of stakeholder that must not be forgotten are those who do not benefit from the program or are harmed by the program such as students who are not admitted to the program (victims) (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Including all stakeholders (beneficiaries, agents, and victims) in the design and implementation of a program evaluation is the first principle of evaluation practice (Bryk, 1983).

EVALUATION METHODS FOR COLLECTING CREDIBLE EVIDENCE

The purpose of any method is to collect *credible evidence* to document program activities. Information is used to make decisions for program improvement. When seeking methods for the evaluation, consider what information is needed to make decisions about the program vs. the cost and ease of collecting information.

Ideally, a variety of methods should be used in combination with each other to get a complete picture. For example, using a student survey to determine student satisfaction with the program can be complimented with employer interviews seeking information about the quality of graduates and their preparedness for the workplace. McNamara (2004) suggested the following methods be used for collecting evaluation data: questionnaires, surveys, checklists, interviews, documentation review, observation, focus groups, and case studies.

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