

Background for Reviewers Visiting Programs that Offer Distance Education Courses and Programs

Background

Currently, there are considerable differences among Nurse Anesthesia Programs in the amount of didactic instruction offered via distance education. Some programs, of course, offer no distance education courses. Others offer one or two courses via distance, while a small number of programs offer a large part of didactic instruction to students at sites remote from the program location. Some offer courses via the Internet while others use one-way or two-way televised instruction or DVD's. The attention reviewers pay to issues of quality related to distance education modalities, of course, will vary according to the amount of distance education provided and perhaps the type of delivery as well.

In many respects the aspects of programs reviewers might be concerned about in examining programs that offer courses via distance education are the same as they are for on-site education. In fact, some distance educators make the point that the attention accrediting agencies are expected to give to evaluating quality in distance education courses and programs should pertain equally to programs and courses delivered onsite. They are probably right. Most of us would agree that quality in onsite instruction varies considerably. However, legislators, regulators and others that play a role in establishing the requirements accrediting agencies must meet still see distance education as an untested and questionable environment for effective learning. This means that as reviewers evaluate program quality, they may be examining the experience of students in distance education courses more carefully than that of students in onsite courses.

What, then, are some of the areas COA reviewers should examine when they visit a program that offers part of its didactic courses via distance education?

1. Faculty training and support

The amount of training required often depends upon the faculty member's role in course development. Distance education, particularly computer based distance education, has often led to the "unbundling" of responsibility for course development where the faculty member has the responsibility for the content of the course and other experts are responsible for course design and the technical aspects of the course. If the faculty member's responsibility in course development is primarily to provide the content, faculty training could be limited to teaching in the computer-based instructional environment.

However, if faculty members develop courses themselves, considerably more training is needed to ensure course quality. In this case, training should also include pedagogy and best practices in facilitating learning through course design.

Teaching via one- or two-way television also presents challenges different from working in a classroom where all students are present. It is important that faculty members teaching in this environment develop strategies for involvement of students in remote classrooms. They also must be cognizant that the tools they use in the classroom, such as power point presentations and blackboards, must be visible to students at a distance as well as to students onsite. Handouts and tests need to be prepared sufficiently in advance that they are available to students at the remote sites at the time the class is delivered. Additionally, graded assignments and tests must be returned to students in a timely fashion.

Technical support for faculty and students is also critical to quality instruction. In the case of televised instruction, it is important that support is available during the broadcast to manage any technical problems that may arise. For computerized instruction, technical support must be readily available to both students and faculty. If 24/7 support is not provided, faculty members need to be sure assignments, such as tests or collaboration on group projects, that require students to be online during a specific period of time, are scheduled when technical support is available.

2. Opportunities for and effectiveness of interaction between faculty and students and students and students

Interaction between faculty and students that promotes learning is a hallmark of all instruction. Given faculty and students are separated in the distance education environment, it is important that special attention be given to faculty/student interaction in this mode of instruction. Similarly, student to student interaction is important in facilitating learning.

3. Other Indices of Quality

Several indicators of course quality have been discussed above. In addition to the indicators already specified, there are other sources of information that are important to examine in evaluating course quality. The COA standard dealing most directly with distance education is Standard III, Criterion C11:

Distance education programs and courses satisfy accreditation standards and achieve the same outcomes as traditional educational offerings.

The breadth of the criterion suggests that in reviewing programs that offer distance education, it is important to keep in mind the possible implications each of the standards and criteria might have for distance education, students studying at a distance, and faculty teaching distance education courses.

4. Academic and Student Services

For programs that offer a substantial percentage of their programs offsite, it is important that academic resources and student services, such as library services, registration, financial aid, and advising are available. While COA policy does not define clinical training offsite as distance education, availability of such services may also be important to students assigned to remote clinical sites.

5. Program Growth

Distance education may be a strategy the program is using to increase the number of students in a program. If the numbers of students in the program have increased substantially as a result of distance education, it may be important to determine if the program has sufficient budget, staff, faculty, and/or support services to maintain a high level of program quality.

For Further Reference

For several years, WCET, an organization connected with the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education that deals with issues concerning educational technology, has focused activity on the development of “Best Practices” for electronically delivered instruction. Information concerning their work and the results may be found at http://www.wcet.info/services/publications/accreditation/Accrediting_BestPractices.pdf. The best practices have been adopted by all of the regional accrediting associations as guidance for accredited institutions who offer computer based learning.