

# Benchmarks for Internet-Based Distance Education

The IHEP study *Quality on the Line: Benchmarks for Success in Internet-Based Distance Education* (2000) explored benchmarks, guidelines, best practices, and principles as they apply specifically to distance education. The National Education Association, America's largest faculty professional association, and Blackboard (an extensively used course management system for Web-enhanced and Web-based education), commissioned IHEP to validate the benchmarks that are specifically applicable to Internet-based distance education.

Twenty-four benchmarks emerged from the study as essential to quality distance education. The broad areas of benchmarks include: institutional support, course development, teaching/learning, course structure, student support, faculty support, and evaluation and assessment.

The institutional support benchmarks deal with institutional efforts to maintain an atmosphere favorable to quality Internet-based distance education through infrastructure and policy-making. These benchmarks include a documented technology plan including a security system; assurances of the reliability of the technology delivery system; and a system that supports and maintains the infrastructure of distance education.

Course development benchmarks focus on the development of courses and courseware and include the availability of standards for course development, design, and delivery; the provisions for the review of course periodicals; and whether course design requires students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate as part of the course requirements.

The teaching/learning category benchmarks involve the vital role of course interactivity; appropriate and timely feedback for students; and the use of effective research/assessment methods in determining the validity of resources.

The four benchmarks course structure relate to how the system's policies, procedures, and resources support teaching; student advisement on motivation and minimum technology requirements prior to enrollment; provision of course information in written form; the availability of library resources; and teacher/student agreement on the schedule for submission of assignments and faculty response.

Student support benchmarks include not only the usual student services available on campus, but also the training and support for taking an Internet-based course. These benchmarks involve: making students aware of the availability of programs, services, and processes (admissions, tuition, fees, textbooks, technical support, and other support services); hands-on training in using electronic

sources; access to technical support throughout the course; and a system of responding to student support needs in an appropriate and timely manner.

Benchmarks for faculty support include: technical assistance in developing online courses; assistance for faculty in the transition to Internet-based instruction, including assessment; faculty training and mentoring throughout the course; and written materials relating to student use of electronic sources.

Evaluation and assessment relates to policies and procedures for the evaluation of distance learning. Three benchmarks were identified in this category: multiple methods of program evaluation based on standards of practice; data collection on educational technology used in evaluating effectiveness; and regularly reviewing learning outcomes. ✍



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