DISTANCE EDUCATION & ACCREDITATION—
RIDING A TIDE OF OPPORTUNITY

A chapter from the New Directions in Higher Education Sourcebook (2001)
"Making the Connection Between Accreditation and Learning Outcomes"

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Skeptics argue that the nation's rich history of regional accreditation may be overwhelmed by the tsunami of technologically-mediated instruction. However, the rapid development of distance education also may be seen as a rising tide that raises all ships, offering an unprecedented opportunity for new learning together with the development of appropriate assessment processes. This chapter focuses on a likely evolutionary path that identifies the accreditation resources and processes necessary to respond to change in educational-delivery systems with an appropriate system of quality assurance. As one accreditor remarked, "This is a golden opportunity to reinvigorate a long history of regional accreditation, spurred by the shift in redefining Mr. Chips to 'chips' and education that is anytime and anywhere" (Mandeville, 2000). We conclude with a list of questions rather than answers to help guide future investigation and action in accreditation.

The Changing Landscape of Higher Education

Higher education has enjoyed the luxury of adhering to constancy in the academy's offerings and approaches—seemingly regardless of technological, economic, or political changes in society. Standards and practices associated with postsecondary study of the 1900s were purposefully similar to those of the 1800s. And while content changed with the advance of science and technology, the pedagogy of the university remained the same.

The advent of educational technologies has threatened to alter the practice of higher education before, but none have the scale and scope that distance learning possesses. More than a century ago, Thomas Edison predicted that the cinema would replace books, forecasting subsequent revelations of televisions and VCRs replacing teachers and traditional classrooms. While these technologies have triggered excitement in the classroom, such multimedia has not contributed convincingly to marked or demonstrable improvement in learning. The combination of programming ease, as found in LOGO (developed in the late 1960s) together with aggressive introduction of PCs 'designed' for K-12 users, provided additional learning tools with few strategies to assess learning outcomes. Indeed, learning seemed most apparent where computers were *not* aligned in rows, facing an instructor (as in traditional classes), or where they were *not* segregated to areas named as labs, invoking scientific inaccessibility rather than engagement. Beginning in 1968, Seymour Papert of M.I.T.'s Artificial Intelligence Laboratory initiated school-college partnerships that are now found in diverse sites, such as MIT's Media Laboratory and charter schools in Los Angeles. These partnerships typically involve students and teachers in circular pods, accessible throughout the school day and in any class. Rennsalaer Polytechnic Institute, through their computer-assisted studio labs in the sciences, also offers a non-traditional approach to teaching with technology as an aid. Such convivial formats combined with the accessibility of the world wide web triggered true, significant change in

educational practice. New technologies have enabled educators at all levels to implement strategies that place the student as learner and teacher as coach, a concept familiar to those conversant with school reform efforts such as the Coalition of Essential Schools[1]. Educators must now grapple with the definition of who is the coach and with what role technology now plays. Pedagogy in the new media requires serious and rapid involvement of those experienced in evaluation and assessment. Educators have little choice in addressing this challenge when faced with the stunning and rapid introduction of distance-learning opportunities.

There are numerous reasons why technology has become the lever of change for higher education. And it could be argued that this change is a culmination of a number of factors, including the move toward a global economy as well as the growing interest in postsecondary studies by students and families. But we offer the following reasons why it is happening now, to the degree it is happening:

    ✍ <u>The Internet opened communication to the public.</u> In the late 1960s, faculty and researchers enjoyed and created the backbone of distributed computing options, with the formation of the Internet's precursor, the DARPAnet (supported by the U.S. Defense Department). Options for university faculty expanded in the 1970s with several events, including a plan for networked computing for The White House, applications for industry (such as airline reservations or supermarket scanner codes), and the development of personal computers (PCs). The growth in email usage illustrates the point. In 1985, there were 300,000 email users registered world wide (Jones, 1997). By September 2000, the U.S. and Canada alone accounted for over 161 million online users (NUA, 2000). Today there are over 377 million online users worldwide, and the world market is expanding at incredible rates of 5 to 6 percent each month. Such explosion in technological innovation and usage has had significant impact on American higher education.

    ✍ <u>Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) recognized that online technologies expand their market</u>. Colleges, universities, and as well as corporations and proprietary postsecondary institutions, began to see how the web would promote distance education and distributed-learning opportunities. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the number of institutions of higher education (IHEs) offering distance education has increased by one-third since 1994-95. By the end of the twentieth century, 44 percent of IHEs offered distance-courses (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). The number of enrollments reached 1.3 million credit-courses, about half of which were provided by 2-year colleges. Thirty percent of all distance education courses now use the web (Green, 2000), and that figure will most certainly grow dramatically over the next few years. Essentially, the web has begun to erase the traditional boundaries set up through legislation and other regulations. Now, institutions have more freedom to look beyond their traditional geographic market. For those up to the challenge, the world is literally their new stage.

    ✍ <u>Distance education has challenged the concept of traditional higher education</u>. Until the late 1900s, higher education was the acknowledged primary provider of adult learning and degree programs. During the 1980s and 1990s, other, non-traditional players came into the game, including for-profit institutions and corporate universities. For-profit entities, such as the University of Phoenix and Devry, Inc., have since become major players in adult learning. Since its founding in 1976, University of Phoenix has become America's largest for-profit IHE, serving over 60,000 students each year at over 70 sites and through distance education. But more recently, other, non-institutional entities, such as Blackboard.com and e-college.com, have expanded the pool of distance providers. These e-firms supply technical services to help traditional IHEs get online. Partnerships between traditional IHEs and for-profit ventures, such as OnlineLearning.net (UCLA Extension plus for-profit investors) and Fathom.com[2], now challenge traditional formulas for how, where, and when learning takes place.

"A New Way of Learning for a New Kind of Student" is the self-declared tag for Harcourt Higher Education[3]. Licensed to operate in the state of Massachusetts, with a Student Service Center in Pennsylvania, Harcourt's catalog claims "no on-campus classes, no registration lines to stand in…just high-quality education delivered via the power of the Internet" (Harcourt Higher Education, 2000). Similar are a number of online colleges, such as Barnes & Noble.com, a fee for service organization, that offers online learning for those seeking degrees or simply professional development. The corporate business market also adds complexity to the list of organizations involved in education, as it becomes a burgeoning force in adult education, reaching over $7 billion by 2002, a 35-fold increase since 1997 (Investor's Business Daily, 2000).

Absent accountability, quality assurance, and evaluation, distance learning increasingly attracts educational providers attuned to marketability and profit. Distance education in its many forms is changing our perceptions about how we communicate and learn—on both business and personal levels. Consumers are conscious of the power of e-commerce and e-learning, and the ideals associated with 'learning anytime-anywhere' are not lost on the public at large.

In the eyes of some consumers, increased competition for students among new distance education providers, colleges and universities has resulted in significant 'blurring of the lines' in terms of who and what higher education is. Higher education continues to become more complex than ever, and is much more difficult to compartmentalize and describe (Marchese, 1998). While we still analyze our IHEs in terms of traditional Carnegie classifications, their usefulness in light of these new forms of learning continues to fade.

An important fact to consider is that much of the online, asynchronous course and degree work is aimed to professional/graduate-level students. University of Phoenix, for example, is explicitly targeted to professional audiences interested in upgrading their education. A recent OERI report found that corporate vendors have provided approximately 2.4 million information technology certifications to some 1.6 million individuals worldwide since 1997 (Adelman, 2000).

While a majority of the growing number of completely on-line programs for higher education remain non-credit bearing, serving the professional development interests of a broad number of adults holding baccalaureate or other degrees, it influences—and challenges—the capacity of traditional providers to educate. It also invites particular attention by the accrediting associations as they reflect and describe their standards in the review of distance education programs to assure that they reflect quality, integrity and effectiveness.

A Question of Quality and Control

This expansion of higher and adult distance education challenges traditional mechanisms for assuring educational quality[4]. As Martin, Manning and Ramaley discuss in their chapter, the institution is ultimately a learning organization. But what type of quality exists? Need we be assured that Psychology 101 offered in Des Moines, Iowa, is comparable to that offered in Chico, California or Columbia, South Carolina? Can we be sure that some one who receives a degree online is gaining the same knowledge and intellectual development as someone who experiences their education on campus? Are we heading for a bifurcation in terms of educational quality between online and traditional systems? Or will we create the necessary checks and balances to ensure that quality is quality, regardless of how it is disseminated? Many colleges and universities have presented their distance learning courses and programs as one and the same as their resident instruction. Yet, the public may question the quality of distance learning efforts, particularly those taught only by part-time faculty and adjunct lecturers. Will accreditors assume they are

pushed to seemingly looser standards, or will they come to give even more attention to standards? (Wellman, 2000; Chronicle of Higher Education, 2000). Do alternative accreditation processes hinder an accrediting association's reliance on the self-evaluation process as a guide to institutional improvement?[5]

These are difficult questions to answer. Nonetheless, the future perception of higher education demands that issues of quality be resolved to some degree. Arguments about either the advantages and disadvantages of online education remain incomplete, and generate questions regarding the quality of the various initiatives. For example, doubters may argue that distance education lacks a systemic way to control for quality in the expanding online market. Proponents quickly—and justifiably—may respond that traditional higher education has never instituted those types of checks and balances. Although we embark on a new century, we continue to be burdened with the reality that course quality varies greatly from state to state, from institution to institution, and even from class to class. How do we ensure quality for all learners at all levels?6

The Institute for Higher Education Policy, in association with the National Education Association (NEA), and Blackboard.com, recently released a set of 24 benchmarks for distance education as an initial set of standards for providers (NEA, 2000). While these benchmarks provide some indicators of effective practice, they are only recommendations for quality practice lack the compelling authority for their implementation.

The Western Association and the North Central Association have established alternative assessment guidelines for distance education programs. These may constitute a pragmatic approach in as much as they are based on a parallel, 'separate but equal' track for those institutions already accredited by traditional standards.

Federal standards are likely to come into play in 2001. The National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity—the group that evaluates accrediting associations' compliance with the U.S. Education Department standards—is reconsidering how the accreditation and recognition of distance learning should be addressed in amendments to the Higher Education Act of 1998. Accrediting associations need to consider the implications of the U.S. Education Department deferring action on policy that would expand current recognition practices to include distance education, or conversely, to legislating separate standards for distance learning. Recent discussions on Capitol Hill suggest that legislators will require that some gateway agency be created to validate the quality of distance education by 2002. Accreditors will need to contribute to the development of distance providers at the same time they consider how current or evolving standards might address concerns about strengths and weaknesses in the delivery system.

Beginning in Autumn, 2001, Congress will examine whether the distance-learning industry has assumed responsibility for self-regulation and quality assurance. Legislators already have made it known that they would consider imposing regulations on the industry should they contemplate on expanding public oversight of these programs (Ludes, 2000b). Accreditors will need to be attentive to the shift that may take place, should distance education be removed from the scope of activities of the recognized accrediting associations. Ultimately, accreditors will need to address the challenges of distance education, regardless of the pace of previous attention.

With unforeseen alacrity, the regional associations have formed a trans-regional discussion and collaboration on what serves as an appropriate evaluation of distance education. The newly formed Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions will act on guidelines for site-based institutions involved in distance education in February, 2001.[7] These further recommendations regarding best practice in electronically-offered programming were initially drafted by The Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications with facilitation by CHEA.[8]

Regional Accreditation Serving a National Constituency

In the last two decades, distance education has moved from an array of on-line courses developed within and for conventional adult education to programs that compete with for-profit institutions and corporate programs. These are often intentionally independent of regional processes for quality assurance. Standards for accreditation, relying on institutional self-study and peer review, serve as nationally- and internationally-accepted processes of quality assurance. This contextual framework has been the elaboration of institutional mission, educational programs, and student outcomes. Focused on traditional settings or conventional campus-based programs, regional accreditors are now compelled to conduct their own self-evaluation, renewing their commitment to cooperation among regions and reflecting on what constitutes quality in education for this new century.

Each of the six regional accrediting associations has begun a two-year process of reflection, with the goal of providing effective strategies for quality assurance that serves the complex array of educational institutions (McMurtrie, 2000). This 18-24 month review is exceptionally rapid for organizations accustomed to the lengthier, more cautionary and deliberative cycles of change. As distance education providers invoke terms such as university, faculty, and deans, they strain the attributions used by accreditors and seen by the public as imparting credibility. It is the adoption of this mantle of 'belonging to the academy' by the new providers that is one of many triggers for accreditors to enhance their cooperation and to seek a common definition of what constitutes quality in distance education that transcends the geography of their regional boundaries.

The six regional associations cooperated on a set of guidelines for the "Evaluation of Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs" (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, 2000). These guidelines offer a "system of accountability grounded in enduring values and principles through which quality has been defined" for what they term "responsible innovation" (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, 2000, p.iii). These guidelines represent explicit attention to the challenges posed by distance education providers, bringing a convergence of various statements developed regionally since the 1990s.[9] The regional accreditation commissions for higher education will continue to limit their review to degree-granting institutions of higher learning; in doing so, they seek an unprecedented "degree of cross-regional consistency, compatible with their independence and autonomy", while also relying on current expectations that "nearly all on-line programming leading to degrees is being provided by traditional institutions which have a substantial academic infrastructure within a single region" (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, 2000, p.iii).

The adoption and implementation of the proposed September 2000 Statement will draw upon cross-regional cooperation. Such mutual aid was facilitated, in part, by the formation of CHEA in 1996 and by its sponsorship of two annual forums on "Assuring Quality in Distance Learning." This mutual assistance among the regionals builds on their individual guidelines which since 1997 have adapted or incorporated distance learning technology into existing standards (MSACS, 1997, 1999; NEASC, 1996; WASC, 1999). Some regional guidelines currently appear to pour the new wine of distance learning into the 'old bottle' of recognition in that institutions must receive prior approval under the traditional procedure of "substantive change" before offering at least 50 percent of a degree program through distance learning. Significant concerns reflected the accreditors' desire for institutional commitment to resources, planning, faculty involvement, academic integrity, and assurances of student learning.

Changing Viewfinders:
Seeing Distance Learning Entities as Educational Institutions

The New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), the nation's oldest regional accrediting agency, and the only one that serves institutions at all levels of education, recently attempted to distinguish distance learning from off-campus and alternative offerings. In doing so, NEASC identified distance education programs as exceeding the earlier interpretation as another form of instruction or as an alternate instructional site for an institution (NEASC, 1996; 1997). Thus, the September 2000 Statement of the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions contributes a robust set of standards regarding the quality of education offered through distributed-learning environments, advancing earlier, more timid steps taken by individual accrediting agencies over conventional periods of time associated with the review of standards. For example, NEASC's "Principles of Good Practice for Elecronically Offered Academic Degree and Certificate Programs" was not intended to replace the Standards for Accreditation; rather its aim is to "give direction in the review of distance education programs as a part of the accreditation process" (NEASC, 1996, p.1). In its companion document, the NEASC definition of distance education was presented "as a formal educational process in which the majority of instruction occurs when student and instructor are not in the same place. Instruction may be synchronous or asynchronous. Distance education may employ correspondence study, or audio, video, or computer technologies" (NEASC, 1997, p.9).

This 1997 NEASC review was developed by a task force on distance education to address "all the concerns of the regional commissions on institutions of higher education" (NEASC, 1997, p. 1), broadening the concerns found in the principles of the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education endorsed by the regionals a year earlier. The need to guide peer reviewer teams assessing the quality of distance education was clearly more pronounced and urgent than in 1977, when NEASC's Commission on Institutions of Higher Education reported to its Board that "that a major problem facing the Commission " was "how to handle agencies that are empowered to grant degrees, and yet operate without a faculty or campus" (NEASC, 1986, p. 113). Distance education now invited greater attention by the accrediting associations, as exemplified by a 1998 issue of *The American Journal of Distance Education*.

States also have recognized the challenge posed by distance education to assuring the quality of educational programs. Yet their responses also have been scattered rather than coherent. They often have adapted outmoded licensure or degree charter legislation to apply to the new virtual organizations. Considerable work remains on a legislative level as virtual universities seek authorization to operate within states that continue to refer to outdated criteria.[10]

Strange Bedfellows:
Distance Education and Standards-Based Accreditation

Accreditation seeks what the Middle States Association terms "clear processes to guide the educational policies that underpin the distance learning program and curricula" (MSACS, 1997, p. 2). Specialists in campus computing, such as Casey Green, urge caution about investing in new computer endeavors without ensuring that academic programs are improved as well. Policy makers and congressional leaders may find pressure to move from the current rush to provide equitable access to computers for students at all levels to insisting that the effectiveness of these efforts will be as measurable and subject to quality control. Thus, distance education may heighten the pressure to coordinate and develop assessment standards and guidelines that ask comparable questions, regardless of whatever mode of education is offered:

What is your mission? Can you demonstrate that learning has occurred?

Faculty and public concern converge on the issue of credibility of the courses and programs offered online as well as on-campus. Efforts to ensure that effective learning occurs in either environment will be a 'net' gain for both distance education and accreditation.

Over the past three decades, accreditors (and the public) have supported the rapid rise of distance education with little attention to new benchmarks for evaluation and assessment. We now must concern ourselves with the following issues or devalue the opportunities ahead:

- ✍ Do institutional standards for higher education apply to distance learning by colleges and universities as well as the new virtual providers?

- ✍ Who will serve as the peer reviewers for the virtual universities?

- ✍ How will standards be reformed to guide the quality education of distance learning?

- ✍ What assumptions regarding certain aspects of the learning climate—such as class size, attendance, retention, degree completion, the provision of student services, or the mechanisms for dealing with academic transgressions—be discarded or modified? For example, Harcourt.com accepts an eight-year cycle for baccalaureate completion. Most for-profit distance education providers tolerate and accept a graduation or degree completion rate of eight percent, noting that many of their students merely are seeking professional development courses.

- ✍ Does the primary responsibility for the development and improvement of educational programs lie with faculty, as current accreditation guidelines typically state? Distance education providers need to demonstrate that they enjoy full participation by the college community, that they employ faculty with appropriate professional qualifications, that they are responsible for the development and improvement of the instructional program, have a shared system of governance particularly with regard to academic affairs and that they are evaluated to ensure they are effective in their work with students. How can or should these standards be reformed to serve distance education providers?

- ✍ Will students be assured a balance or variety of instructional approaches (e.g., will students still have a choice to take courses, online or traditional, that best meet their learning preferences?).

- ✍ While high school and college on-line courses can be valuable to those otherwise unable to take specialized or advance placement offerings (e.g. rural schools or impoverished school regions), how will we assure that learning has occurred and that students have been well served?

New Directions for Accrediting Association

Jacob Ludes, chief executive officer of NEASC, acknowledges that the regionals are challenged by new distance education providers who have assumed the mantle and nomenclature of traditional higher education. He also sees this as an opportunity for the regionals to renew their commitment to mutual cooperation in applying their frameworks and standards to develop a common definition of what constitutes quality in distance education (Ludes, 2000a). Distance education providers' focus on 'customizing education' for its clientele is similar to that of web-based entrepreneurs who "look for a big, inefficient market that could be radically transformed" as Michael Dell asserts (Dell, 2000, p.9). According to Ludes, "Accrediting associations rely on the historical success of providing coherent and sustained application of the self-evaluation process to improve and strengthen education" (Ludes, 2000a).

The accrediting associations' response to distance education will require "meaningful institutional involvement in developing standards that are more broad in defining the practice of accreditation" (Ludes, 2000a). In February 2001, the eight commissions of higher education that form the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions will act on their September 2000 Statement on the Evaluation of Electronically Offered Degrees. According to Ludes (2000a), their action is likely to reflect the following criteria:

Distance education programs should:

  ? be consistent with the institution's role and mission, identifying the extent to which it remains in compliance or represents substantial change that triggers prior review and approval processes.

  ? be supported by an appropriate commitment of institutional budget (including technical, physical plant, staff and technical assistance) and policy statements that support student program completion

  ? rely on an organization structure that offers adequate support for program implementation including adequate and appropriate relationships to academic structure

  ? strive to assure a consistent and coherent technical framework for articulation and transfer of course/programs as well as a framework for students and faculty

  ? provide technical support for students in a variety of schemas, including online and person-to-person contact.

  ? choose technologies appropriate to the requirements of programs, curricula, and students served.

  ? observe requirements of regional and federal jurisdictions including those related to disabilities, copyright law, state and national requirements for postsecondary institutions and dissemination of sensitive information or technologies.

  ? let curricula evolve consistent with the discipline, but allow standards of quality to endure, relying heavily on qualified faculty and a focus on learning outcomes for an increasingly diverse student population.

Concluding Points: Assuring a 'Net Gain'
for Distance Education Providers and Accrediting Associations

Accrediting associations should be applauded for examining the new realities created by a myriad of distance-education providers. Technology-mediated distance learning will transform the learning landscape on campus and online. Accreditors will need to consider what accommodations are necessary in order for them to continue to serve as a credible authority on the quality of education provided. As indicated at the outset of this chapter, we conclude with a list of issues we believe must be addressed in order to allow this inquiry to reinvigorate the self-evaluation process.

  ? Accrediting associations and distance-education providers must define mutually-acceptable options for program recognition so each may continue to play a valuable role in the provision of higher education. *Akin to the interface of environmentalists and loggers in the Pacific Northwest; accrediting associations and distance-education providers must each negotiate to assure their future role.*

- Caution should be exercised to ensure that alternative-assessment practices do not result in a diminution of program specific standards. *To what extent will or should accreditors focus on outcomes without examining content of curricula, whether online or on-campus?*

- Although the nation's accrediting associations prepare to launch much-needed guidelines for distance-education programs, they will also need to develop guidelines for off-site institutions. *The proposed guidelines are for site-based higher education institutions engaged in distance-learning. They will either form the basis for the accreditation of virtual universities or clarify why they cannot.*

- Distance-education providers should reflect upon their perceived need for, and the effects of seeking regional accreditation. *What value should distance-education providers place on this accepted process of self-evaluation and assessment? How accommodating are they willing to be to those standards?*

- Both distance-education providers and accrediting associations need to recognize that their autonomy may be affected as the federal government expands its scrutiny of the quality of educational programs and seeks to confirm program validity for the public.

The reality is that higher education is traveling upon a path far less traveled than ever before. Technological innovation is the primary instigator of the rapid evolution of postsecondary and adult education, but other inputs, such as increased competition and interest, have stimulated interest beyond that of academia. The corporate world now looks to higher education as an opportunity ripe for the picking.

During the latter half of the 1990s, accreditors began asking the difficult questions about how to deal with the growing distance-education market. And as suggested, these questions are complex, as are the answers. The difficulty for IHEs and other educational providers will be making appropriate changes in quality control while the technology and pedagogy changes under their feet. This alone argues for a set of standards and practices based on indicators that allow for flexibility in terms of delivery.

Distance education/mediated-learning is here to stay. Both higher education and the public are cognizant of that fact. The good news is that higher education has begun to deal with these issues head on. The challenge will be to keep future discussion focused on quality, rather than gatekeeping.

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[1] See www.essentialschools.org for further information.

[2] The Fathom.com consortium includes Columbia University, the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, the New York Public Library, the London School of Economics, Cambridge University Press, and the British Library. This new (2000) Internet 'company,' will invest $80 million in 2000-2001 alone, will distribute information, and will offer online classes to users around the world.

[3] See www.HarcourtHigherEd.com.

[4] Information Technology certification programs, unlike programs found in education, do not include necessarily an instructional provider; although not the focus of this article, they too, demand quality assurance at a time in which certification programs have exploded in number. Clifford Adelman notes that the majority of these programs are based in sub-baccalaureate institutions and are more likely found as continuing or extended education units of these four-year not-for profits. Even as these are likely to remain at "the periphery of higher education," the U.S. Department of Education produced a report comparing a new system of credentialing for the information technology and telecommunications industries since 1990 to that used by traditional higher education (Adelman, 2000).

[5] Some regional accrediting associations prefer to offer alternative accreditation processes, such as the "Academic Quality Improvement Project," of the North Central Association of Schools & Colleges, as a desirable approach for institutions already accredited. (Crow, 2000). (Also see: www.aqip.com)

6 While this article pertains to higher education, the issues apply to elementary and secondary education as well. High schools are moving increasingly from subscribing to individual on-line courses to joining virtual high school consortia (i.e., the Concord Consortium). Absent accrediting standards for entirely virtual institutions at any grade level—public, private and international schools rapidly may rapidly succeed in an end run around circumvent accreditation. For example, the marketability popularity of online virtual college tours, for example, has led entrepreneurs such as entrepreneurial U.S. News to pilot plans for Web-based admissions counseling "to simplify the process of getting into college but also remove some of the stress by making it fun." For example, "a computer personality test that is designed to match students to campuses doesn't ask about SAT scores, but rather whether a student likes to ski or comb the beach." (Brownstein, 2000, give page number for direct quotes). [Brownstein, Andrew, 'U.S. News' Apologizes for Secretly Filming Focus Group on Proposed Mobile Counseling Center.' The Chronicle of Higher Education, Oct. 24, 2000]

[7] The eight higher education commissions of the six regional accrediting associations will discuss and review the September 17, 2000 Report, "Statement of the Regional Accrediting Commissions on the Evaluation of Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs, and Guidelines for the Evaluation of Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs," at its February, 2001 meeting (CRAC, 2000). These commissions and associations are the commissions on higher education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (MSACS) and the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), the North Central Association of Schools and Colleges (NCASC), the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges (NWASC), the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), the Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and, and the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC).

[8] See www.wiche.edu/telecom.

[9] The September 2000 document serves as a draft for a 2001 report available from the regional associations or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, (CHEA).

[10] Revamping charter regulations, which precede any accreditation candidacy, must be addressed by states prior to, rather than in response to, applications by distance education providers.