QUALITY IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

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Abstract — The discussion last year at the annual convention of the American Federation of Teachers and the subsequent resolution that was passed highlights the concern felt by many about the quality of distance education programs. There are many who feel that the quality of the teaching, the support that students receive and the information provided to students is not as good in a distance education environment as in a conventional face-to-face situation. The panelists come from varying backgrounds, coming from a variety of academic institutions and industry. The panelists will explain how quality is assured at their institutions and claim that students who do learn at a distance receive as good an education as those in the face-to-face environment. Evidence to justify the claim will be produced. Factors such as the cost of the provision and the scalability of the operation are factors that will also be discussed.

Index Terms — curriculum, Distance Learning, quality delivery, role of technology in distance learning

C. FAY COVER

Distance Education, the web, industry based competencies and fundamental knowledge, can they all be achieved while maintaining quality? As we embrace the World Wide Web and the associated technology, ensuring that we have enhanced student learning and met all course objectives can be a daunting task. Can we make it work? For example, one concern is centered on how to provide the appropriate interaction with the professor and other students. Exploring a variety of technologies being used today by various educational and industry alliances. The quality of distance education depends upon a variety of factors, such as; technologies used, professor training, reliability of the equipment and data communications networks, and many others. Finding the right mix and delivering up-to-date curriculum is a challenge that can be overcome.

WENDY LAWRENCE-FOWLER

At the University of Texas-Pan American, we deal with quality in three aspects of distance education: the quality of course materials, the quality of presentation, and the quality of student services. While we address each aspect independently, we also try to capitalize on the synergistic interplay among the aspects. It is this synergy that defines the quality of a program and can be evaluated via the outcomes of the learning experience.

We use an approach to course materials development that matches the faculty member’s level of expertise and comfort with technology, as well as their teaching style, to the level of development support provided. Support levels range from simply providing server space and maintenance to a level, which entails a team of individuals including a faculty content expert, an instructional designer, a media specialist, a graphic designer, and one or more courseware technology assistants. Training for faculty is provided in both technological and pedagogic issues (including an online course titled “Teaching Online in Higher Education”) A rubric which faculty use to complete a self-assessment of their course materials is also available. Finally, the Center for Distance Learning provides online and dial-in helpdesk facilities for students. Through the University of Texas System and a consortium of Hispanic serving institutions (HETS), distance learning students are provided access to web-based information/library resources as well as advisement and mentoring programs.

MARK GUZDIAL

When people say "Web," there’s often a reaction of "Distance Education!" as being a potential killer app. Yet, many large-scale distance education efforts rely much more on paper and less on Web-based or other computing technologies. Some of the problems of current technologies for distance education include cost, lack of robustness at large scales, and inferior quality and educational effectiveness compared to other technologies. For example, we know that lectures are among the least effective educational interventions, and putting lectures in a postage-stamp size streaming video window certainly doesn't make them better. At the same time, there are opportunities for computing and network technologies to help solve problems in distance education that paper can't solve alone, like having a mentor handhold a student through a difficult problem, or working through multiple iterations of a design in a studio environment. Finding the right role for the right technologies in distance education is an open problem.

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Session T4F