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# Building an Evaluation Plan for Fully Online Degree Programs

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Online degree programs are continuing to gain popularity among institutions of higher education as indicated by *U.S. News* who recently listed 263 accredited online graduate degree programs on its Web site (U. S. News and World Report, U.S. News Online, n.d.) As the access afforded by distance education increases the number of students served, educational institutions must develop processes that ensure quality in their programs (Schott, Chernish, Dooley, & Lindner, 2003). This paper describes the research undertaken to develop an evaluation plan for a fully online graduate degree program. Through a review of the literature and consultations with program administration and faculty, a plan was developed with the purpose of assessing the state of the program in reference to its goals, determining a roadmap for program improvement, and providing a framework for future program decision-making. The purpose of this paper is to document the assessment process to assist program administrators in adapting it for use in their own programs. Although data was collected using extant data, surveys, and interviews, and analyzed using quantitative and qualitative analysis, the results of the analyses are not discussed here. The emphasis of this paper is in the resulting evaluation plan. The theoretical framework, process, methodology, and resulting plan for evaluating the online degree program are described herein. Specifically addressed is how an online master's degree program evaluation was developed and translated into a plan for use by other programs.

## **Problem Statement**

As more and more completely online degree programs are established, the need to develop evaluation methodologies and processes to guide that assessment practice increases (Dobbs & Allen, 2004; Schott et al., 2003). While much attention has been given to the quality of online courses or components of courses, much less focus has been given to the evaluation of online degree programs as a whole. Past research has compared online learning to face-to-face learning (Hoben, Neu, & Castle, 2002), explored the effectiveness of online tools such as discussion boards and chat rooms (Spatariu, Hartley, & Bendixen, 2004) assessed interactive aspects of courses (Roblyer & Ekhaml, 2000), addressed evaluating effective online instruction (Graham, Cagiltay, Lim, Craner, & Duffy, 2001; Wentling & Johnson, 1999), and assessed the value of online courses in specific fields of study (Carmichael, 2001; McMaster, 2002). There have also been articles concerning the success or failure of a variety of technologies used in this environment (Feldman, 2002; Smith, 1998) and administrative control processes (Dobbs & Allen, 2004). As this past research indicates, much of the literature about online evaluation of teaching and learning has been aimed at the individual course level. While these studies make significant contributions to the best practice and theoretical framework for the use of individual

tools and processes, they do not specifically explore program evaluation in a holistic manner. Wentling and Johnson (1999) agree that systematic evaluation in online instruction is lacking.

## **Evaluation**

Evaluation theory has its roots in social inquiry and the desire for accountability and control. Depending upon the goals of the evaluation, different methodologies and strategies are used to guide inquiry. The methodologies and strategies are selected based on the type of evaluation required. Evaluation falls into three main types, those oriented toward the construction of knowledge, those orientated toward placing value, and those oriented toward how information is used (Alkin & Christie, 2004).

Evaluation can be further broken into two distinct categories, formative and summative (Scriven, 1967). Formative evaluation focuses on processes and summative evaluation focuses on outcomes (van der Veer Martens, n.d.). Formative evaluation can serve a variety of purposes. The focus of needs assessment is to gather information on whether or not there is a substantive need for an action, evaluability assessment involves deciding whether or not the program or entity can be feasibly evaluated, structured conceptualization assessment defines the program or technology, the target audience, and the possible outcomes, implementation evaluation looks at program delivery, and process evaluation is designed to review implementation of the program, improve implementation, and to track systems change (Alkin & Christie, 2004; Rossi, 2004).

Outcome evaluation assesses whether the actual outcomes (results) program are consistent with the desired outcomes. Much of the past focus on program evaluation has been on outcomes, but it has limitations due to the lack of consideration of objectives, plan, process, and feedback (Stufflebeam, 1974). Evaluators have been criticized for focusing on outcome evaluation and excluding the process side, or focusing on process evaluation without examining outcomes (Fleischman & Williams, 1996). Current trends in academic assessment reflect the importance that faculty, institutions and accreditation bodies place on the demonstration of both process and outcome components (McKenna, Finn, & Ossoff, 2005).

## **Graduate Degree Program Evaluation**

In accredited institutions of higher education, graduate programs are required to undergo formal program assessment at regular intervals. The formal reviews are usually structured processes that are relatively standardized, making no distinct considerations for the type of program or its characteristics. This assessment usually occurs every five to eight years. While this process reveals the success or failure of programs to meet predetermined goals, it does not focus on program improvement.

## **Evaluation in the Online Environment**

Because of the unique characteristics of online degree programs, in comparison to traditional, face-to-face programs, researchers have proposed that more holistic evaluation plans be used (Schankman, 2004). In 2000, the Institute for Higher Education Policy, in association with Blackboard and the National Education Association, prepared a report titled *Quality on the line: Benchmarks for success in Internet-based distance education*. This study involved a thorough review of the literature in search of what constitutes quality in online education. The researchers used the case study method to compile their information. First, a literature review

was conducted to compile benchmarks already reported by other researchers, organizations, reports, and other publications, resulting in an initial list of 45 benchmarks. Next, they identified institutions that were already leaders in Internet-based education, and finally they visited each of the selected institutions and assessed the degree to which they incorporated the benchmarks. As a result of the study a final list of 24 benchmarks were established that are considered most essential to the success of an Internet-based distance education program at any institution (see Table 1.)

**Table 1. Benchmarks essential for program success**

<p><b>Institutional Support Benchmarks</b></p>	<p>A documented technology plan that includes electronic security measures is in place and operational to ensure both quality standards and the integrity and validity of information.</p>
<p>The reliability of the technology delivery system is as failsafe as possible.</p>	
<p>A centralized system provides support for building and maintaining the distance education infrastructure.</p>	
<p><b>Course Development Benchmarks</b></p>	<p>Guidelines regarding minimum standards are used for course development, design, and delivery, while learning outcomes determine the technology being used to deliver course content.</p>
<p>Instructional materials are reviewed periodically to ensure they meet program standards.</p>	
<p>Courses are designed to require students to engage themselves in analysis, synthesis, and evaluation as part of their course and program requirements.</p>	
<p>Teaching/ Learning Benchmarks</p>	<p>Student interaction with faculty and other students is an essential characteristic and is facilitated through a variety of ways, including voice-mail and/or e-mail.</p>
<p>Feedback to student assignments and questions is constructive and provided in a timely manner.</p>	

<p>Students are instructed in the proper methods of effective research, including assessment of the validity of resources.</p>	
<p>Course Structure Benchmarks</p>	<p>Before starting an online program, students are advised about the program to determine (1) if they possess the self-motivation and commitment to learn at a distance and (2) if they have access to the minimal technology required by the course design.</p>
<p>Students are provided with supplemental course information that outlines course objectives, concepts, and ideas, and learning outcomes for each course are in a clearly written, straightforward statement.</p>	
<p>Students have access to sufficient library resources that may include a “virtual library” accessible through the World Wide Web.</p>	
<p>Faculty and students agree upon expectations regarding times for student assignment completion and faculty response.</p>	
<p>Student Support Benchmarks</p>	<p>Students receive information about programs, including admission requirements, tuition and fees, books and supplies, technical and proctoring requirements, and student support services.</p>
<p>Students are provided with hands-on training and information to aid them in securing material through electronic databases, interlibrary loans, government archives, news services, and other sources.</p>	
<p>Throughout the duration of the program, students have access to technical assistance, including detailed instructions regarding the electronic media used, practice sessions prior to the beginning of the course, and convenient access to technical support staff.</p>	
<p>Questions directed to student service personnel are answered accurately and quickly, with a structured system in place to address student complaints.</p>	

Faculty Support Benchmarks	Technical assistance in course development is available to faculty, who are encouraged to use it.
Faculty members are assisted in the transition from classroom teaching to online instruction and are assessed during the process.	
Instructor training and assistance, including peer mentoring, continues through the progression of the online course.	
Faculty members are provided with written resources to deal with issues arising from student use of electronically-accessed data.	
Evaluation and Assessment Benchmarks	The program's educational effectiveness and teaching/learning process is assessed through an evaluation process that uses several methods and applies specific standards.
Data on enrollment, costs, and successful/innovative uses of technology are used to evaluate program effectiveness.	
Intended learning outcomes are reviewed regularly to ensure clarity, utility, and appropriateness	

**Note. From “Quality on the line: Benchmarks for success in Internet-based distance education” by The Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2000.**

In 2001, a formative evaluation of e-learning was completed for a Canadian military organization (Broadbent & Cotter, 2003). The evaluation focused on a 6-week, Web-based, course preparing students for instruction on military management skills. The evaluators used Stufflebeam's CIPP model (context, input, process, product) as a framework for their evaluation plan (Stufflebeam, 1983). The plan employed four data collection methods: written questionnaires from students and instructors before and after training, focus groups with students and instructors before, during, and at the end of the course, direct observation during the training (monitoring web discussions,) and document review. Broadbent and Cotter (2003) concluded that although evaluation is fundamental to grasping the value of an e-learning program that the plans will vary depending on the goals of the program and the budget assigned to the evaluation.

### **Assessing Quality in the Selection of a Degree Program**

When deciding on whether or not to select an online degree program, students face vast numbers of considerations. To aid in the selection process, online Web sites devote space to pointing students in the right direction. One site lists four considerations when assessing the quality of an online master's degree program: Does the program use professor-guided, web-threaded discussion groups? (Insisting that the omission leads the student toward correspondence courses.) What does the graduate program use for a course hosting platform? (Suggesting student-friendly platforms such as eCollege, WebCT or Blackboard.) Does the course use current videos and lecture materials? (Warning students to beware of "canned" courses.) And, what is the status of the school's accreditation? (Florida Atlantic University, n.d.). Another Website tells students to ask the following questions: (a) how is the course presented? (Find a school that incorporates innovation.), (b) how do students interact with each other? (Find a program that requires interaction.), (c) are the instructors qualified? (Look for staff and support personal dedicated to their online programs.), (d) what kind of reputation does the school have? (Look for a strong program, not just school.), (e) how are students evaluated? (Ensure the programs involved apply what has been learned.), (f) what kinds of library facilities are available? (Look for a system that ensures that reference materials are available from anywhere.) (Obringer, n.d.). Review of the literature and Web sites combine to give a comprehensive picture of the status of evaluation of online degree programs. Next, a project, resulting in an evaluation plan incorporating these principles, will be reviewed.

## **Background of the Project**

The degree program under review is a 36 credit-hour master's degree program in training and development. The program was established through grant funding in 2001 and the first fully online degree students entered the program in the fall of 2002. It started with a cohort-based model and moved to an open-enrollment model at the beginning of its third year. WebCT had been used as the primary learning management system since program inception and students are required to participate in a short on-campus orientation prior to enrolling in their first course. The entire program is delivered online.

In the process of undergoing a mandated graduate program review, two observations surfaced. The first observation was that the formal review process was focused on outcomes and not necessarily on improvement. The second observation was that while all programs have similarities, there are certain characteristics of online degree programs that are not addressed in standardized review processes.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The CIPP model, originally developed by Donald Stufflebeam in 1971, guides this evaluation. The CIPP acronym was formalized in 1983 and updated most recently in 2002 (Stufflebeam, 1974; 1983; 2002). CIPP stands for the core concepts of the model, context, inputs, processes, and products. This model recognizes essential types of decisions encountered in education, planning, programming, implementing, and recycling (Wentling, 1980). Context evaluation reflects the environment, identifies needs, and forms goals and objectives. Input evaluation assesses the competing ways to achieve the goals specified in the context evaluation. Process evaluation reviews how the program operates. Product evaluation focuses on program results, connecting outcomes with the other measurements taken in the earlier areas of evaluation. Since the model's inception, Stufflebeam has added the additional concepts of effectiveness, sustainability, and transportability. This model was chosen for two primary reasons: (1) the model places emphasis on guiding planning, programming, and implementation

efforts, and (2) the model emphasizes that the most important purpose for evaluation is improvement (Stufflebeam, 2002).

### **Development of the Evaluation Plan using the CIPP Framework**

In order to result in a useful and effective evaluation, stakeholders were identified and formal agreement reached on the goals and expectations of the evaluation process (Stufflebeam, 2002). In this case, the primary stakeholders were identified as the program director and faculty because they have responsibility for improvement efforts. Secondary stakeholders included the department head, the director of graduate programs, and the students because they have an interest in the evaluation results but would not be tasked with any of the improvement efforts that may result. Primary stakeholders were interviewed to determine their vision of the program goals and evaluation needs, resulting in the following goals: (a) maintain a program focus and course offerings that compare favorably with other top ranked HRD programs, (b) incorporate the benchmarks determined to promote quality in online programs, and (c) offer a set of courses that provide students with the proper competencies based on current needs and trends in the field of HRD.

Per the CIPP model, the next part of the evaluation was context analysis. This analysis determined the environment, needs, assets, and problems in the program. Although the environmental questions could be answered by review of extant data, it was determined that two groups should have had critical input, the students and the instructors.

In input analysis, the evaluation compares the strategies of the competition to those of the program under review. For this analysis there were two components, a review of the literature to gather published information about the competition, and a Web search for additional information about strategies. The focus of these searches was to investigate other programs that could serve as models and to compare strategies with those of other successful, established programs.

For the process part of the evaluation, program activities needed be monitored, documented and assessed. Although there had been no prior formalized program evaluation, there had been other evaluation activities occurring throughout the program's existence. Each course had been assessed through standardized, student end-of-course evaluations. There was also a large assortment of program documents. In addition, all of the program faculty and staff that had taught in the program were still accessible to the evaluator. This allowed the evaluator to not only develop a current, accurate profile of the program, but to also delve into any situation where more information was needed.

The product/impact part of the evaluation assessed the program's reach to the target audience. Student perspectives are at issue here, as is any hard evidence of impact upon the intended target audience. Multiple perspectives were critical to assess this aspect of the program since it was likely that much of the evidence would come from perceptions rather than hard data.

Effectiveness evaluation looks at the quality and significance of the program outcomes and conjures up many of the standard outcome measures such as graduation rate and retention. Since this program was relatively new and the first cohort had yet to graduate, some of the standard quantitative measures did not yield useful information. So, in addition to measures of retention and grade point average, the evaluation elicited effectiveness information from the current beneficiaries of the program, the students. In future evaluations, it will be important to also elicit

information from other beneficiaries, such as area employers and other community stakeholders.

The sustainability aspect of this evaluation assessed the extent to which the program's contributions were institutionalized over time. Here the evaluation should find out which program attributes should be maintained and which should be redirected and/or removed. The program beneficiaries (the students), the program faculty, and the program administration needed to have input into this part of the evaluation. In addition, the program budget needed to be analyzed for sustainability and effectiveness for its intended goals.

Finally, the transportability aspect of the evaluation looked at the extent to which the program could and/or should be adapted or implemented elsewhere. To move online learning forward, the structures and processes from the more successful programs will need to be adapted by other institutions and programs. This part of the evaluation assists in establishing similar programs in other environments.

### **The Evaluation Plan**

Each of the aspects of the CIPP evaluation model was used as a lens with which to determine the aspects of the program that should be addressed and sources from which data should be collected. This resulted in a list of 18 elements of the program to be investigated. This list of evaluation elements and sources of information is displayed in Table 2, along with aspect of CIPP model that advised its inclusion.

Once the components of the evaluation were determined, the evaluation plan was developed. The plan includes a review of extant data, interviews with both faculty and administrators, a survey of current students, and summative review of the finished evaluation. Many considerations were explored when deciding on how the data would be collected and via what instruments. The review of the existing data, such as the course materials, program documents, and standard program measures, were easily accessible and readily available. The collection and review of this data and other competitive information is relatively straightforward. Input was also required from current students enrolled in the program. Because this is a distance program, interviewing and group techniques were not practical. As a result, student input was gathered via an online survey. Several of the evaluation components required input from program faculty. Due to time constraints and in order to obtain robust data, a one-on-one interview format was chosen. This also left open the possibility of later conducting a focus group in order to further investigate themes found in the interviews. For the same reasons, interviews were also the chosen methodology for the administrators. The final part of the plan is a review of the evaluation that looks at what aspects of the program can and should be replicated and what aspects should be altered or discontinued. A summary of the six elements of the evaluation plan is found in Table 3. Next, each component of the evaluation plan will be described in detail.

**Table 2 . Components of the evaluation plan**

Evaluation Element	CIPP Aspect
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Review of program documentation for information on problems, needs, assets, and environment of the program	Context
Input from program administrators and faculty for information on problems, needs, assets, and environment of the program	Context
Input from program students to gather information on problems, needs, assets, and environment of the program	Context
Review of other HRD programs to determine the top-tiered programs in HRD	Input
Comparison of program's focus and course offerings with the identified top-tiered programs	Input
Review of literature in HRD to determine current trends and issues on which HRD master's programs should be focused	Input
Review of existing program end-of-course evaluations	Process
Input from program staff and administration to gather information on program activities and processes	Process
Input from current students to assess perceptions of program impact	Impact
Interview with faculty to assess perceptions of program impact	Impact
Review of student GPAs	Effectiveness
Review of retention figures and progress toward degree completion	Effectiveness

Input from current students as to program effectiveness	Effectiveness
Input from program faculty and administration about program aspects that should be maintained, changed or removed	Sustainability
Input from current students about program aspects that should be maintained, changed, or removed	Sustainability
Analysis of budget and spending	Sustainability
Review of the evaluation to determine what aspects of the program can be used in establishing and/or improving other online degree programs	Transportability

**Table 3. Resulting elements of the evaluation plan**

Evaluation Element	CIPP Aspect Addressed
Review of existing program documentation including end-of-course evaluations, student GPAs, retention figures, progress toward degree completion, and budget	context, process, effectiveness, sustainability
Review of the literature and top-tiered programs in HRD and comparison with program under evaluation in regard to course offerings and focus	input
Interviews with program faculty focused on eliciting information about problems, needs, assets, environment, and impact of the online program.	context, impact
Interviews with program administrators about problems, needs, assets, environment, program activities and processes, aspects of the program that should be maintained, changed, and removed	context, process, sustainability
Survey of current students about problems, needs, assets,	context, impact, effectiveness,

environment, perceptions of program impact and effectiveness, and aspects of the program that should be maintained, changed, and removed	sustainability
Review of the evaluation for best practices and suggestions for future online program implementation	transportability

## Methodology

### *Extant data*

Extant data collection could begin immediately using this evaluation plan. Specific metrics will likely vary from program to program depending upon what is usable and accessible. Table 4 shows a list of metrics that were deemed to be both relevant and accessible for this program.

**Table 4. Extant Data Metrics**

No. of intents to enroll per cycle
No. of completed applications per cycle
No. of admitted students per cycle
No. of new enrolling students in courses per cycle
No. of students dropping from program per cycle
GPA's of students in cohorts
Admissions test scores
Undergraduate GPA
End of course student evaluations

Program Costs
Program Revenue

### Student survey

Because students are a mobile population, with new students coming into the program and older ones leaving, the initial instrument developed for this evaluation was the student survey. The 24 IHEP benchmarks from Table 1 were reviewed and a list compiled of only those items that students could assess. This resulted in a list of 21 items. Similar to the IHEP study, the items were formatted into questions using a Likert-type scale. Respondents were required to rate both the importance of each item and the extent to which the item was present in their degree program. An additional ten demographic and open-ended questions were added to collect degree-specific information and to capture thoughts not obtained through the ratings. The final list of 31 questions was reviewed by a panel of program faculty to assure face-validity. This review resulted in the rewording of two questions. The final list of items is shown in Table 5. The survey was put on-line and tested with a group of 5 graduate students who had previously been enrolled in online courses, but were not members of the sample.

Data analysis of the student survey involved comparing the average ratings of each question from our respondents to the averages for each question from the IHEP study. T-tests were used to perform this analysis. Items found to be significantly different from the IHEP averages were addressed, specifically those items that were both significantly different and lower in average. Using this method also allowed the evaluator to look at each item not only in terms of its quality rating, but also in terms of its significance to the program. For example, items that are rated low in quality and low in importance are less critical than items rated low in quality and high in importance.

**Table 5. Student Survey Items**

Q1 – My interaction with my instructors is facilitated through a variety of ways.
Q2 - My interaction with other students is facilitated through a variety of ways.
Q3 - Feedback about my assignments and questions is provided in a timely manner.
Q4 - Feedback is provided to me in a manner that is constructive and non-threatening.
Q5 - I am provided with supplemental course information that outlines course objectives, concepts, and ideas.

Q6 - Specific expectations are set for me with respect to the amount of time per week I should spend for study and homework assignments.

Q7 – The instructors grade and return assignments within a reasonable time period.

Q8 – Learning outcomes for each course are summarized in a clearly written, straightforward statement.

Q9 - I have been instructed in the proper methods of effective research.

Q10 – My courses are separated into self-contained modules or units that can be used to assess my mastery before moving forward in the course.

Q11 - Each module, unit, or lesson requires me to engage in analysis, synthesis, and evaluation as part of the course assignments.

Q12 – Contact information and tools are provided to encourage students to work with each other and the instructor.

Q13 - The courses are designed to require students to work in groups using problem-solving activities in order to develop topic understanding.

Q14 - Course materials promote collaboration among students.

Q15 - Sufficient library resources are available to me.

Q16 - Before starting the program, I was advised about the program to determine if I have the self-motivation and commitment to learn at a distance.

Q17 - I am able to obtain assistance to help me use electronically accessed data successfully.

Q18 - I have been provided with adequate training and information to aid me in securing material through online databases.

Q19 - Written information is supplied to me about the program.

Q20 - Easily accessible technical assistance is available to me throughout the duration of the program.
Q21 – An effective system is in place to address my questions about the program.
Q22 - How many courses have you taken in the program? (include current courses)
Q23 - How many courses do you take in an average semester?
Q24 - Are you a member of a cohort?
Q25 - If on-campus, face-to-face meetings were offered 2 to 3 times during the semester, how likely would you be to attend them?
Q26 - Have you taken an online course prior to enrolling in the program?
Q27 - Would you recommend the program to others seeking a similar degree? Why or Why not?
Q28 - What is your level of agreement with the following statement? “The program has provided me with a rewarding and challenging educational experience.”
Q29 - What items, if any, would you suggest be changed in the program?
Q30 - What items, if any, should the program keep the same?
Q31 – In your opinion, how can the program be improved?

## **Interviews**

The IHEP benchmarks were again consulted to construct questions for the faculty interviews. The questions were also informed by the results of the student survey, highlighting faculty feedback and student-instructor expectations. The faculty interview questions were reviewed by a panel of faculty not in the sample. Although there are many other areas where faculty input can provide important insights, the number of questions was kept to a minimum in order to focus on known quality issues and to respect interviewee time. This resulted in the following list of interview questions:

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses with the variety and quality of the technologies and tools available for your use in teaching online courses?

2. Describe the types and levels of technical and pedagogical assistance that is required when teaching in this program?
3. What processes should be used to support instructors who transition from teaching face-to-face to teaching online?
4. How should student and instructor expectations be managed in our online program?
5. How should instructors in our courses manage faculty-student interaction? What advice would you give other instructors in managing student feedback and communication in our courses?

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the five program faculty members. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was recorded and transcribed. The resulting transcriptions were open coded to develop initial categories and later selective coded to connect to core concepts of online education found in the literature. Approximately eight themes emerged through the analysis of the faculty and administrator interviews. Those themes confirmed some of the information found in the student surveys and highlighted other issues of particular importance to faculty. The administrator questions were developed much in the same way as the faculty questions. The questions stemmed from the IHEP standards and were informed from the results of the student surveys. The resulting administrator interview questions were:

1. How would you describe the reliability and security of the technology used in administering your online courses?
2. What course development standards are in place or should be in place for maintaining quality in your online program?
3. What types of technical and pedagogical assistance are needed to maintain quality in your online program?
4. How adequate are the resources available to your program?
5. What processes should be standardized in order to maintain quality in your online programs?

Administrator interviews were conducted and analyzed in the same manner as the faculty interviews.

## **The Evaluation Report**

The final part of this evaluation plan was the reporting of the results and the translation of those results into action items. The report not only translated the evaluation results to the stakeholders, but also presented the evaluation framework in detail for viable transportability to other contexts. For this evaluation, the report was directed at program faculty and administrators and included detailed analyses and results of all data collection. Results from compiling the outcomes-based metrics were displayed and any items seen as problematic, such as declining retention, were translated into action items to be addressed. Items from the student survey that were deemed important to students and lower than the IHEP standards were translated into areas needing improvement. Themes emerging from the interviews were reviewed for their

importance in relation to the IHEP standards. Items deemed critical to program quality were translated into action items. Other issues that emerged were also noted as items for further review. The final evaluation report listed thirteen action items. The action items are currently under review by the stakeholders. The evaluation plan is also being reviewed in preparation for its next use.

## **Discussion**

This paper does not attempt to present findings relative to this particular evaluation, but addresses findings relative to the process. Evaluation plans are working documents with the ability to change as new information informs the evaluation. As outlined in the introduction of this paper, this evaluation sought to do three things: (a) assess the state of the program in reference to its goals; (b) determine a roadmap for program improvement; and (c) provide a framework for future program decision making. In the process a fourth outcome was achieved, the development of a transportable evaluation plan for online instructional programs.

The state of the program was assessed using the IHEP standards as benchmarks for success. By comparing our program results to those standards, we can show the status of our program in relation to known quality programs. By obtaining outcome data from existing documents, we were able to distinguish improvements and deficiencies in the program over the course of its three year existence. Faculty and administrator interviews provided the multiple-perspective approach essential to ensuring that all aspects of program quality were assessed.

The roadmap for program improvement was determined through a thorough analysis of the data collected from all sources. The final evaluation report noted 15 areas of needed improvement uncovered from the document analysis, student survey, and faculty and administrator interviews. This evaluation plan and the resulting action items give the program administrators a clear roadmap not only for program improvement, but also for decision-making. Administrators can now spend resources on items of known deficiency and importance to stakeholders. It also serves as a template for use by other online programs. Other programs can use this following plan to conduct their own evaluations by: (1) Determining stakeholders; (2) Defining program and stakeholder goals and objectives; (3) Determining outcome-based metrics that can be calculated through existing data; (4) Conducting a student survey based on the IHEP benchmarks and analyzing using comparative quantitative analysis; (5) Conducting faculty and administrator interviews with questions based on the IHEP benchmarks and the results of the student survey and analyzing using qualitative analysis; (6) Compiling the resulting data based on areas of improvement; (7) Translating areas needing improvement into action items; and (8) Preparing and distributing the evaluation report to stakeholders. The action items resulting from these processes serve to guide administrators with specific steps that should be taken to strengthen and improve their programs.

## **Implications**

The lack of evaluation of completely online programs can be explained using a variety of reasons such as a lack of university-based fully online degree programs to evaluate in the past, and a limited understanding about the benchmarks in assuring quality in those programs. This research attempts to close the gap in the literature by developing a theoretically sound, research-based approach to online program evaluation by reviewing the literature and other relevant sources to develop a practical, yet effective approach to developing a comprehensive



evaluation plan for online degree programs. This evaluation plan is useful for several reasons, it addresses both processes and outcomes, it addresses multiple perspectives, it uses a mixed methodology approach, and it does not attempt to compare the program to face-to-face instruction, but evaluates online program success on its own merits.

Over the next few years it is anticipated that the number of online degree programs will continue to expand. Like all markets, at some point supply will exceed demand. At that point, weaker programs will disappear. Effective program evaluation is the best way to achieve continuous program improvement. A review of the literature showed little evaluation research focused on online-only programs. This may be because these programs are relatively new and have not been in existence or stable long enough to collect meaningful information. The evaluation plan resulting from this project will help guide program administrators in how to structure their own evaluations and inform them of the types of data that they may want to collect. The hope is that the processes and instruments developed will serve not only for ongoing assessment of this on-line program, but will be applicable to the assessment of other online degree programs, locally and at other institutions.

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