

The Accreditation of Distance Learning

John G. Flores

Distance learning, while a force in education for more than 150 years, has, in the last dozen or so years, taken on a much greater role. This prominence stems from the union of two powerful forces. First, fiscal constraints compel both academia and business to control costs and improve return on investment. Second, technology—with the ubiquitous nature of desktop computing, wide area networks, and inexpen-

sive broadband—provides an effective means of delivering educational value.

Those of us in the distance learning industry applaud these developments. At the same time, we realize that, with greater opportunity, usually comes increased responsibility.

Diploma mills have been around for decades. They are not a function of distance learning; indeed, rarely does *any* learning take place in that greedy world. But because these operators tend to exploit the online environment, they are a problem to us. They could breed “guilt by association” and erode public confidence in our product.

The thousands of schools that work hard to provide value and a first-rate educational experience face a host of challenges. Not only do they want to distance themselves from disreputable operators, they also are looking for ways to enhance their effectiveness. They seek higher-quality academics and a stronger operational base.

The Distance Learning Accreditation Board (DLAB) was created by the United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA) to help address these pressing needs.

USDLA, founded in 1987, was the first nonprofit distance learning

association in the United States to support research, development, and praxis across the entire spectrum of distance education and training. Our consistent focus has been on quality approaches and professional growth. It is fitting, then, that in 2003 USDLA began the quality improvement organization now known as DLAB.

DLAB complements USDLA’s existing program to credential individual distance learning practitioners. DLAB, in essence, extends credentialing to the institutional level. At the same time, DLAB fosters professionalism in a climate of continuous improvement.

DETERMINING ELIGIBILITY

DLAB promotes excellence in distance learning on a global basis and, in doing so, serves a broad cross-section of schools. There are two overriding elements that distinguish these schools. First, they are engaged in distance learning. Neither the format nor the scale of this distance learning operation is at issue, only the fact that learning takes place at a distance. The second factor is that the schools adhere to the *Principles of Best Practice for*



John G. Flores, Executive Director,
USDLA, 8 Winter Street, Suite 508,
Boston, MA 02108. Telephone:
800 275-5162
E-mail: jflores@usdla.org

Distance Learning developed by DLAB in conjunction with USDLA.

Because accreditation is an intense process, DLAB focuses its efforts on those institutions with a strong likelihood of success

The DLAB staff researches each application and forwards it to the Accreditation Advisory Committee for their review. With the concurrence of the committee, the institution may then apply for candidate status. Eligibility is open to that institution for a 12-month period.

DLAB is somewhat unusual in that we do not charge for an eligibility determination. We believe that an open process is in the best interests of both parties.

If the initial eligibility is withheld, the institution may seek clarification from the staff concerning the action. There is no formal appeals process for eligibility.

There are both objective and subjective criteria for DLAB accreditation. Logically, the objective elements are more prominent in the preliminary stages. The subjective components come to the fore during self-study and review.

OBJECTIVE REQUIREMENTS

DLAB credentials educational providers in three categories: K-12 schools, colleges/universities, and corporate/professional development. DLAB accepts applicants on a global basis; the key element is not *where* on the globe a particular school or its student body is located. It is essential, though, that for some portion of the student body, learning process takes place at a distance. What delivery mechanism the institution uses for its distance learning is immaterial.

Whatever the composition of the institution, it must have the following characteristics:

- Academics. The institution awards appropriate credit to stu-

dents for academic work on their respective level. The school employs a sufficient number of qualified faculty who have direct and regular contact with the students.

- Authorization. The institution must have appropriate authority for awarding credit or degrees. Its distance learning must be consistent with its operating authority and mission.
- Governance. The institution (though not necessarily the distance learning unit) must have a chief executive whose primary responsibility is managing the institution. The institution is accountable to an oversight board.
- Services. Distance learning students must be provided with services—such as, counseling, help desk, placement—and learning resources (e.g., library resources) commensurate with their needs and level.
- Stability. The institution and its distance learning unit must have sufficient financial revenue to support its mission and ongoing operations.

During the eligibility review the institution will likely be asked to affirm many of these areas. This reflects the importance of these attributes to a sound operation and to the successful accomplishment of the candidacy process.

SUBJECTIVE CRITERIA

Subjective criteria primarily fall in the realm of adherence to the 10 *Principles of Best Practice for Distance Learning*, which are available at www.USDLA.org.

The institution's adherence to the *Principles* is the primary focal point of the self-study and on-site review. Certainly at the eligibility stage, institutions should be famil-

iar with the *Principles* and how the *Principles* relate to their program.

STATUS

Once eligibility is established, an institution has 12 months to apply for candidacy. Eligibility, as such, does not confer a relationship between the institution and DLAB. Thus, an institution may not publicly disclose or imply a relationship with DLAB prior to official acceptance by DLAB into candidacy for accreditation. At that point, the institution will be given specific guidelines for describing its status with DLAB.

BENEFITS OF DLAB ACCREDITATION

There are several direct, immediate benefits that stem from DLAB accreditation:

- Use of the distinctive DLAB "approved" emblem.
- Participation in the DLAB referral service for educational consumers.
- News releases from DLAB heralding the institution's achievement, sent to both local and educational media.
- Announcement on the USDLA and DLAB Websites.
- Complimentary admission or reduced rates to USDLA professional meetings and tradeshow.
- A special-interest forum within USDLA, designed for DLAB-accredited institutions.
- An ongoing framework for continuous improvement and professional development within the institution.

USDLA welcomes your participation and support as the new DLAB service is launched. For additional information please contact: dlabinfo@usdla.org.