

Good (Best) Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs

A 10-Year Retrospect

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Who would have ever imagined the effect of one set of distance education principles developed 10 years ago (1995)? At a time in the history of distance- and e-learning, when many associations, organizations, and institutions set about to define themselves and those standards by which their constituents would be held accountable for quality practices, one set of standards has emerged preeminent: the work of the Western Cooperative of Educational Telecommunications known as *Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs*. Even though the original 17 principles enumerated in 1995 have evolved to 27 in 2005, all institutions of higher education and all regional accrediting commissions in the United States now endorse these principles. This article celebrates the 10-year history of these principles by providing the reader a glimpse of their beginnings, changes, and eventual widespread adoption. Four documents that span this story



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and evolution and use by regional accrediting commissions are briefly introduced: *Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Academic Degree and Certificate Programs* (1995), *Guidelines for Distance Education* (1997), *Statement of Commitment by the Regional Accrediting Commissions for the Evaluation of Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs* (2001), and the *Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs* (2001).

Ten years ago (June 1995), the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE) and its program, Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET), published the *Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Academic Degree and Certificate Programs* (known hereafter as *Good Practices*). While other distance- and e-learning guidelines, principles, and standards were published during this same 10-year period by national and regional organizations, none of them influenced more programs and exhibited more staying power nationwide than the *Good Practices* developed by WICHE/WCET, an educational compact of 15 western states. Other standards released during this time are less known and used, even though they were drafted by larger or more prominent organizations. Some of those other standards that emerged during this period include *Distance Learning Evaluation Guide*, prepared by the American Council on Education (1996); *Distance Graduate Education: Opportunities and Challenges for the 21st Century*, developed by the Council of Graduate Schools (1998); *Quality on the Line: Benchmarks for Success in Internet-based Distance Education*, established by the Institute for Higher Education Policy (2000); and *Distance Education: Guidelines for Good Practice*, put forth by the American Federation of Teachers (2000).

This article seeks to recognize the significant role that these *Good Practices*—now known as *Best Practices*—have had in defining and guiding distance- and e-learning over this critical 10-year period. This acknowledgment, for those unfamiliar with its origins, may best be made by

briefly reviewing the history and evolution of the original 17 principles that comprised the *Good Practices*, and documenting their current place among the regional accreditation commissions that approve new and reaffirm previous accreditation for institutions.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

On March 5, 1993, Sally M. Johnstone, director of the Western Cooperative for Education Telecommunications, submitted an award-winning application for \$271,420 to the U.S. Department of Education and its Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) for the purpose of establishing and promoting distance- and e-learning standards and eliminating state barriers. The overarching purpose for FIPSE's existence, and hence its selection of this application, was to "support innovative reform projects that hold promise as models for the resolution of important issues and problems in postsecondary education" (U.S. Department of Education, 2005, ¶1). At the time, any effort made to standardize principles and streamline differing state policies associated with distance- and e-learning was as needed as it was innovative; it would also require significant innovation to secure consensus across such diverse stakeholders.

Johnstone and WCET had clearly identified a problem of not only regional (15 western states) but also national significance. The original application reported that "there are no standards for electronically-delivered education programs, so states now have no consistent way of monitoring their quality or providing consumer

protection for their citizens" (Johnstone, 1993, p. i). The application also documented the challenges that distance- and e-learning had already introduced in the early 1990s to students and institutions alike as technology-mediated learning enabled and promoted the crossing of traditional state boundaries, each state with its own unique policies and practices—hence, the title and subtitle of the application: "BALANCING QUALITY AND ACCESS: Reducing State Policy Barriers to Electronically-Delivered Higher Education Programs."

The start date of the FIPSE grant was listed as October 1, 1993, and the end date as September 30, 1996. Johnstone reported to FIPSE in a required annual report dated May 25, 1995—over halfway through the 3-year project period—that near the end of 1994 the team had "obtained additional comments on the proposed list of standards (now called "principles of good practice") for electronically offered post-secondary degree programs; identified other groups and individuals whose input on the standards should be sought; ... [and] developed an important working relationship with the higher education regional accrediting associations" (Johnstone, 1995, pp. 1-2).

Later on in the report and closer to the actual filing date (May 1995), an entry noted WCET's careful use of its advisory committee in vetting the document until all stakeholders were satisfied. The authors of this article italicized two words, "*went again*," in the following quote from the FIPSE report to emphasize the important and painstaking consensus-building process used by WCET on the *Good Practices* document:

May, 1995—At last! Again, after receiving additional comments from around the West, staff made changes that seemed relevant, and the "almost final" draft *went again* to the advisory committee. A May 10 call with the advisory committee resulted in what we are ready to call a

"final draft." Interestingly, this latest version includes a return to our original notion of "Principles of Good Practice," instead of the "Characteristics ..." we had been using for the past six months (Johnstone, 1995, p. 4, italics added).

While it is not the intent of this article to explicate the reasons these guidelines persisted and others did not, the careful selection of the project's 13-member advisory committee—a veritable list of Who's Who in Higher Education—and the patient process of vetting ("*went again*") the principles as many times as needed must have contributed to the widespread adoption of the principles.

In a subsequent section within the annual report titled "What have we learned?", the WCET staff recorded a sense that the results of their regional project in establishing distance education standards may have greater impact sooner than they had anticipated:

We are beginning to recognize more fully the possible policy ramifications of this project. There are a number of indications that the "Principles of Good Practice ..." may become the basis for national agreement on the "standards" for programs offered electronically. It now seems likely that the project will eventually provide—in most cases, for the first time—a tool to assess the quality of electronically-offered programs.... Up to now, there has been nothing to guide the review of electronically-offered programs from any relevant perspective. That is, neither the state agency responsible for regulations, the accrediting community, institutions interested in developing programs for electronic delivery, nor, most importantly, students interested in pursuing educational goals via telecommunications.... Our work on the project thus far has made clear how much this needed guidance might be provided through the appropriate dissemination, endorsement, and implementation of the "Principles of Good Practice." (Johnstone, 1995, p. 5)

THE "PRINCIPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE FOR ELECTRONICALLY OFFERED ACADEMIC DEGREE AND CERTIFICATE PROGRAMS"

The 17 principles identified in *Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Academic Degree and Certificate Programs* (hereafter *Good Practices*) were officially adopted by WCET on June 6, 1995. The *Good Practices* document itself included a preamble, a statement of five guiding assumptions used by the WCET team in developing the principles, and then the 17 principles themselves.

All 17 principles were distributed over three main sections, with the number of principles associated with each section set off by the em dash: (1) Curriculum and Instruction—4 principles; (2) Institutional Context and Commitment—11 principles; and (3) Evaluation and Assessment—2 principles.

The first section (4 principles), "Curriculum and Instruction," addresses learning outcomes, clarity and completeness of programs, appropriate interaction between faculty and students, and faculty oversight of programs.

The section "Institutional Context and Commitment," with its 11 principles, was further subdivided into five categories, with the number of principles associated with each category also set off by the em dash: (1) Role and Mission—2 principles, (2) Faculty Support—2 principles, (3) Resources for Learning—1 principle, (4) Students and Student Services—4 principles, and (5) Commitment to Support—2 principles. "Role and Mission" ensures that technology is appropriately used to meet program objectives and that programs are consistent with the institution's role and mission; "Faculty Support" focuses on training and services for faculty who use technology to teach; "Resources of Learning" sees that learning resources are made available to students; "Students and Student Services" concentrates on students'

access to information and services, students' background with technology, and the accuracy of admissions materials; and "Commitment to Support" focuses on the evaluation of faculty as related to electronically offered programs and also examines the continuation of programs until such time students can complete their degree.

The third section (2 principles), "Evaluation and Assessment," attends to the evaluation of programs' educational effectiveness and assessment of student achievement.

GUIDELINES FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION

Two years later (1997), WCET and the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC), comprised of the executive directors for all regional commissions, further adapted and developed a new standards document known as the *Guidelines for Distance Education* (hereafter *Guidelines*), the principles enumerated in *Good Practices*. These *Guidelines*, built on and adapted from the *Good Practices* so soon after their creation, reflect the scrutiny and interest regional accreditors were giving to distance education programs that had begun to proliferate at traditional and for-profit educational institutions.

The *Guidelines* document is comprised of 19 principles—two more than *Good Practices*—divided over five sections and three more than *Good Practices*: (1) Curriculum and Instruction, (2) Evaluation and Assessment, (3) Library and Learning Resources, (4) Student Services, and (5) Facilities and Finance. Further analysis of the 19 principles reveals that 12—with some adaptation—are carried over from the original *Good Practices*.

Two new principles were listed under "Curriculum and Instruction": currency of curricular materials and programs and also the clarity of distance education policies regarding material ownership, faculty compensation, copyright, and so forth.

"Evaluation and Assessment" included a new principle about ensuring the integrity of student work and the credibility of degrees. *Guidelines* also included two additional principles in the "Learning Resource" section: students' appropriate access to learning resources made available by institutions, such as laboratories and equipment, and the institution's monitoring of the same. The new section, "Facilities and Finance," was comprised of two principles: the institution's ability to make the program financially viable and effective and its possession of sufficient technical expertise to support and perpetuate the program.

BEST PRACTICES FOR ELECTRONICALLY OFFERED DEGREE AND CERTIFICATE PROGRAMS

In a personal communication with Johnstone on June 7, 2005, she reported that in 1999, the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC) "asked WCET staff to amend the original [*Good Practices*] to create one that would be acceptable to all the regional accrediting associations. The Executive Directors of the regional accrediting associations wrote an introductory document and adopted the revised Principle(s) of Good Practice." Marianne Phelps, senior consultant for WCET, referred to this collaboration in a personal communication on June 27, 2005, as the "second phase" of what C-RAC and WCET had begun with the *Guidelines* some 3 years earlier. She also observed that "the part of the Interregional Guidelines that commits each of the regionals to using the same DE guidelines was really ground breaking. It was the first time they all agreed to approach assessing anything the same way." The result was two documents, both adopted by the regional accrediting commissions in March 2001: *Statement of Commitment by the Regional Accrediting Commissions for the Evaluation of Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs*

(hereafter *Statement*) and the *Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs* (hereafter *Best Practices*).

The *Statement* expresses "the approach of the regional commissions to ... emergent forms of learning" (Committee of Regional Accrediting Commissions, 2001, p. 1). The conclusion of the *Statement* explains the development of the *Best Practices*. It reads,

As the higher education community increasingly expands educational opportunities through electronically offered programming, the regional commissions are committed to supporting good practice in distance education among affiliated colleges and universities. Doing so is in keeping with their mission to encourage institutional improvement toward a goal of excellence. To this end several years ago, each commission adopted and implemented a common statement of *Principles of Good Practice in Electronically Offered Academic Degree and Certificate Programs* developed by the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET), resulting in a shared approach to distance education. More recently, desiring to complement these efforts, the regional commissions collectively, through C-RAC, contracted with WCET to fashion a more detailed elucidation of those elements which exemplify quality in distance education. Based upon the expertise of WCET and the already substantial experience of the regional commissions in assessing distance education, the resulting statement, *Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs*, provides a comprehensive and demanding expression of what is considered current best practice. It is being utilized by each commission, compatibly with their policies and procedures to promote good practice in distance education among their affiliated colleges and universities. (Committee of Regional Accrediting Commissions, 2001, p. 5)

The *Best Practices* has five sections: (1) Institutional Context and Commit-

ment, (2) Curriculum and Instruction, (3) Faculty Support, (4) Student Support, and (5) Evaluation and Assessment. There are now 27 principles—10 more than *Good Practices* and eight more than *Guidelines*—and each principle in the *Best Practices* is supported by operational questions to facilitate more widespread standardization and implementation. Upon comparing and contrasting the *Best Practices* to the earlier *Good Practices* and *Guidelines* documents, it is evident that many of the principles in the most recent document remain unchanged. While five standards from the *Good Practices* were not included in the *Guidelines*, it appears that at least four of the five principles are included in the *Best Practices*. Although many of the principles within *Best Practices* are derived from those in the previous documents, *Best Practices* does have several new principles. These new principles address issues such as distance education being considered a substantive institutional change, institutional understanding of legal and regulatory requirements, working with consortial partners, strategies of inclusion, security of personal information, and then the overarching idea of distance education evaluation taking place within the context of full institutional evaluation. Outside of these noted additions, all standards identified in *Best Practices* appear to be based on one or both of the *Guidelines* or *Good Practices* documents.

CONCLUSION

These principles developed 10 years ago have now become household terms to institutions of higher learning—as well as others—engaged in distance- and e-learning. All major regional accrediting bodies recognized by the U.S. Department of Education have now adopted and endorsed one version or another of these principles (two of the major regional accrediting bodies at this writing subscribe to *Guidelines*, the remainder to *Best Practices*), and that

version of principles can readily be found on their Web sites. As the *Statement* asserts, “it is being utilized by each commission, compatibly with their policies and procedures to promote good practice in distance education among their affiliated colleges and universities” (Committee of Regional Accrediting Commissions, 2001, p. 3).

The authors submitted a draft of this article to Johnstone to review for accuracy and also for her thoughts about what might be next for the *Best Practices*. Her pithy response outlined her and WCET’s two goals in the following personal communication on July 17, 2005: “trying to help institutions understand how to improve their services to students (both on and off campus) using technologies ... [and] to get student support services in line with the *Principles of Good Practice*.”

While the 10-year anniversary of *Good Practices* may be quietly noted by a few, the influence of this seminal work will be felt by many students and distance-/e-learning educators for years to come. What Johnstone and her team said 10 years ago in their update to FIPSE is just as timely today: “We are beginning to recognize more fully the possible policy ramifications of this project” (Johnstone, 1995, p. 5). Happy 10th Birthday, *Good and Best Practices*; may all (y)our wishes come true!

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