

Quality Assurance and the Extended Campus

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Abstract

In today's market when companies are concerned for the fading dollar, the same can be said about academic institutions. Universities and colleges are being affected by the current economic downturn. But not only is funding an issue but also the prospective student. An equally important concern that schools of higher learning must contend with is that of accreditation.

This paper will discuss a process that can be formal or informal but must be considered by faculty and administration in the extended campus to ensure that how the courses are established and the method of delivery is of a quality that will bring in the students and provide an outline to justify accreditation.

Quality Assurance

Quality assurance for many extended faculty is a familiar term because of the various backgrounds we come from. In the military and in the aviation community, quality assurance was the department within an organization that was charged with ensuring that all work met the required standards before a technical manual would be published, a vehicle would leave the motor pool, or an aircraft could be launched. The individuals were trained to look for incorrect procedures or inappropriate parts. The goal of quality assurance was to make sure that the quality of the work was bar none.

In manufacturing and in the service industries, organizations experienced the move towards establishing quality assurance to provide quality to the customer, whether the customer was internal or external to the organization. Total Quality Management (TQM) was established following Deming's concepts of quality and processes used to ensure quality (Walton, 1988). As the TQM movement progressed, we have seen the incorporation of the International Organization for Standardization or ISO as it is known. The ISO web site describes what ISO is about:

“When the large majority of products or services in a particular business or industry sector conform to International Standards, a state of industry-wide standardization can be said to exist. This is achieved through consensus agreements between national delegations representing all the economic stakeholders concerned – suppliers, users, government regulators and other interest groups, such as consumers.” (ISO, 2003)

What makes the University any different from the industries in which we send students out to in order to perform what we have diligently instructed them? Quite frankly, there is no difference in that the University provides a service of education to the communities where our students will be performing. What we have to decide as a faculty and administration is that we must establish a quality process to ensure a quality education.

According to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2003), “Academic standards are predetermined and explicit levels of achievement that must be reached for a qualification to be awarded. Academic quality is the effectiveness of procedures and provisions that enable students to achieve a qualification.”

I believe that what we at ERAU and the extended campus provide to our students is of quality and is of high standard. But what am I basing that idea on? Is it the way I teach? Is it the

response of the students? Or is it by measuring the number of enrollments in the center? All of these are significant indicators that we are performing to a standard. But again, what is quality and what is an academic standard that we can measure up to? The bigger question would be, can we improve even more? Yes we can. But we need to establish a quality assurance process within the extended campus community.

Why Quality Assurance

What makes ERAU and the extended campus unique? For one, not only is the student population diverse in backgrounds and experience, it is the diversity of the faculty that are instructing courses in the classroom and on-line. The diverse backgrounds of each instructor provide an insight to what can be expected in the “real world.” Even though many of our students are performing in the communities, the variety allows the student to gain more knowledge for the field. However, there comes a challenge to the delivery of the course because each instructor is different, and with the case of the center or on-line, some independence to how the course will be presented and students assessed. Is this a problem? It can be if there are no academic standards established and students do not know what to expect in the overall completion for a degree. Faculty members should be adhering to a process that ensures that each student is provided the same information, format, and the same resources to complete a course or series of courses of study, whether the course is taken in on-line, at Cheyenne, or Bahrain.

Another issue for why a quality assurance process is that of accreditation. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) is the organization that ERAU must satisfy to maintain our accreditation. The mission statement of SACS is quite clear, “the improvement of education in the South through accreditation” (SACS, 2003). SACS reviews the University’s programs for quality in enhance learning as well as the engagement of continuous program improvement.

If the desire of the University is to be a competitive force in the community of extended campuses and on-line educational services, plus maintaining accreditation, then there is enough reason to indicate why ERAU should implement quality assurance in education. Parallel to the quest of excellence is that of the student. As faculty and administration we must ensure the

quality education that each one has expected is the same whether the student is in Germany, Alaska, or Cheyenne, Wyoming. How many times has a faculty member encountered the comment that “you guys sure do things different here than the center I just came from”? Does that need to happen?

Are there other reasons to justify a quality assurance process within the extended campus besides improving teaching and delivery of the course? We need to improve the relationship of the University and the communities we are associated with. The community might be the military post or base, but what is happening outside those gates? Is there a student base that has been untapped because of our limited association with the military? Can we improve on that? By ensuring we have a quality process, the student can expect that the information can be equally applied to the commercial operation as well as to the military hanger operations.

Implementing Quality Assurance

Ross, Batzer, and Bennington (2002) wrote a paper dealing with the subject of quality assurance and the implementation of faculty peer review in the *TechTrends* journal. This is what they stated with regards to quality assurance in education.

“With fast emerging delivery systems and broader access, a major need in distance education today is quality assurance, both in academic content and student support. Broad (1999) states “Providing adequate academic and student services to students at a distance is a critical issue for all forms of distance education” (p.6). Institutions are becoming more responsible for managing and substantiating the quality of their instruction to students, as direct purchasers, and to government and businesses, as indirect purchasers.

Quality control is essential with this responsibility. Agreement of faculty toward this path of action is also critical.”

Their statement can also be applied to the classrooms in the extended campus. The quality of our product and the agreement of the faculty are very important to ensuring that we attract and keep the students, and maintain our accreditation.

The authors identified two steps that have to be considered. Step one is that it has to be agreed upon by the faculty to be held accountable for the course and the objectives and, step two is to ensure the processes of the peer review are non-judgmental. Faculty have to be willing to allow for a peer review and that review has to be such that it is not threatening to the faculty

members involved in the assessment of the course. Why this is necessary is that if there is not the agreement, continuous improvement will be derailed.

How can this be accomplished? The authors have outlined five characteristics of a faculty peer review. These are: “1) it must be safe and protect the individuals and institution from unpredictable or arbitrary outcomes, 2) it must use explicit criteria, 3) it must be manageable using only available resources, 4) it must provide developmental feedback of a formative nature, and 5) it must satisfy the demands of the environment for quality” (Ross, Batzer, & Bennington, 2002).

When does this need to take place? This should be considered with each new faculty hired and with each existing faculty teaching at our centers and on-line. As the authors stated: “Formative evaluation helps the instructor provide a more successful experience for students by considering teaching strategies, learning tasks, instructional materials, and the role of technology in the instruction” (2002). When the faculty is successful, the school will be successful as well.

The Tools

As with the public sector demanding “accountable management,” it is time that higher education incorporates these same demands in the classroom. There are a number of processes that can be implemented. For a beginning, there is a paradigm that might provide guidance as to how we should look at quality assurance. The model has been used in the healthcare industry for training. Robert Maxwell (Storr & Hurst, 2001) developed six dimensions of quality that we must review to evaluate our own process of quality. The six dimensions are:

- (1) Effectiveness
- (2) Acceptability
- (3) Efficiency
- (4) Accessibility
- (5) Equity
- (6) Relevance

Let's take a look at each element or dimension beginning with effectiveness. What is the effectiveness of our course development or delivery? One measure has been the student evaluation of the teaching effectiveness. Initially as a new faculty I have reviewed the evaluation and comments with an open mind and considered each comment. But as time has progressed, I

spend little time evaluating a student's opinion. Recently this has been because the student evaluations are not returned to the center or the faculty member in a reasonable time. So besides the student evaluations, what other methods or processes are used? The faculty evaluation completed by the center faculty chair is another tool to determine effectiveness of the faculty, course, or delivery.

The second dimension is acceptability (Storr & Hurst, 2001). Again the student evaluations provide some feedback as to the acceptability of the course. Did the class satisfy the student and their expectations of the course? Did the course meet the needs of the student? Also, the faculty can determine if the course has been acceptable and provide necessary feedback.

Efficiency is the third element that Maxwell has addressed. Efficiency can be related to cost or return on investment. Here is where we might ask ourselves if the course that we have developed or delivered has provided a sound investment for the student and in turn the school. Where we see this coming into play is with the student that is not sure what course he or she should take and as we direct them to a specific one we find that they might not be ready to engage in. We measure efficiency by whether the student returns or withdraws.

Access is an issue that has been raised significantly with the advent of internet courses because there is a movement to ensure potential students have access to classes. Accessibility to what the University has to offer must continuously reviewed and improved upon. But besides the internet, security measures at some military installations where the extended campus is have limited the accessibility of the school. Students that have been deployed have limited access to a class and are we in tune with those limitations.

The fifth dimension is of equity. Is there a fair share for everyone? Are we treating our potential student base equally? With a class of mixed military and civilian which group gets the greater attention? Are the courses offered open to all perspective students? With the recent move to allow students in that did not have an aviation background have been given to more equal representation in the classroom.

The last dimension is relevance. We assume that everything item we present has relevance to what we are delivering. We must evaluate why we feel it is relevant to a course or process that

has been developed. Whether it is the text, slides, videos, or other material, the relevancy must be considered. It is inappropriate to present in a space operations course outdated aviation material. The products must be current and relevant to the course being delivered.

These six dimensions are questions that we must ask ourselves and as a faculty peer group to ensure we have a quality product we are presenting to the student or community. But these are not the only tools that we can incorporate. In another paper, Ian Roffe (2002) provides some insight to some questions that have to be considered when evaluating learning. He focused his paper on the subject of e-learning, which we can use in our on-line courses, but these also can be part of our evaluation of the classroom in the extended campus. He presents a number of questions that can be incorporated in the first dimension of Maxwell's, effectiveness.

Some key questions on effectiveness might include:

- (1) What is the overall satisfaction of the learners with the program?
- (2) What change is there in the knowledge, skills or attitude of participants?
- (3) What changes are there in on-the-job behavior?
- (4) What savings are there in labor?

Now some of these may not be applicable to exactly what we might be teaching. We might not know how a student is effective on the job, but we can evaluate the improvements of the student in the class and subsequent courses. As for savings in labor, having a student that has access to the library and up-to-date information might be a great savings for some companies.

Conclusion

As faculty we are charged with providing a quality education. We may have our own opinions of what that might include. But as we evaluate what we are producing as a service, it will be increasingly important that we take major strides in promoting a quality assurance process within our extended campus and the regions that support the faculty. In the Southwest Region we have taken steps to ensure that what is presented to the student is uniform and standard. We have developed a template for the syllabus. The region encourages the instructor to follow closely the published course outline. There is no question what will be expected of the student. The faculty

is looking into other measures to ensure that the quality of instruction improves. Challenges are ahead of us.

I am not advocating membership in an association nor am I politicking for adherence to QMS2000, but what I am concerned with is that ERAU continue to provide the quality education that companies seek after. When an airline states that the first resumes reviewed are Embry-Riddle attendees, which means something. We must keep going forward.

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