

Developing an Online Program with the AACSB Accreditation Standards in Mind

One of the many weighing concerns of developing an online program is if and how it will impact a school's accreditation. This concern often steers schools away from creating online programs altogether. However, completely ignoring electronic delivery methods may be a strategic disadvantage since the global market for online higher education is expected to grow significantly in the coming decades.

The AACSB Accreditation Standards only provide guidelines for the delivery of programs. The actual organization, structure, content, and delivery of a program are the responsibility of the school. For instance, the standards do not state that a certain percentage of courses must be offered in a classroom setting. The primary concern of the standards is that all business programs have established requirements, sufficient and qualified faculty, appropriate resources, available student services, as well as rigor and relevance that aligns with today's global education and industry needs.

Several areas with regards to the [Eligibility Procedures](#) and the [Strategic Management Standards](#) have been explored below with corresponding ideas that may help align a new online program successfully. The AACSB Participants and Assurance of Learning Standards will be examined in future *eNEWSLINE* articles.

Related Eligibility Procedures

All of the [AACSB Accreditation Eligibility Criteria](#) should be reviewed with the new online program in mind. Listed below are Eligibility Criteria that may need special attention when developing an online program.

C. Degree programs in business must be supported by continuing resources.

This [eligibility criterion](#) emphasizes the importance of having continuing resources that support a program. Meaning, is the program adequately financially supported? Does the program have sufficient, qualified faculty and support staff? Is the program's technology appropriate? And, are there sufficient resources to build robust assurance of learning methods? As with any program, documentation should detail how all resources will be obtained, managed, and replenished.

D. All degree programs in business offered by the institution at all locations will be reviewed simultaneously.

Schools should be prepared to present detailed information on all of the programs that are under review for both initial and maintenance of accreditation.

F. The institution or the business programs of the institution must establish expectations for ethical behavior by administrators, faculty, and students.

This area can be particularly important due to the ethical dilemmas that surround online education (primarily with regards to plagiarism and cheating by students). Therefore, schools need to establish clear and enforceable policies that encompass ethical behavior in online settings. In addition to policies, schools should explore whether or not their online platforms and processes will support the enforcement of ethics.

Strategic Management Standards

Standard 2: Intellectual Contributions

The mission incorporates a focus on the production of quality intellectual contributions that advance knowledge of business and management theory, practice, and/or learning/pedagogy. The school's portfolio of intellectual contributions is consistent with the mission and programs offered.

Standard 2 is concerned with the existence of a research culture within the institution—specifically the business school. The AACSB Standards clearly state that cross sections of faculty should be involved in the development of intellectual contributions, and that their contributions should be aligned with the mission of the school. For schools that have large portions of their programs that are solely delivered online, there may be a need to use a different staffing pattern in order to adequately support a generally greater number of students that are involved in online courses. This in turn can lead to difficulty with the statement “the portfolio of intellectual contributions reflects the mission and includes contributions from a substantial cross section of the faculty in each discipline.”

Standard 3: Student Mission

The mission statement or supporting documents specifies the student populations the school intends to serve.

Generally, online programs are global in nature. Thus, they can create high levels of diversity in student populations. If used appropriately, this is certainly one of the strengths of an online program since it satisfies the diversity and internationalization requirements of the standards on a variety of dimensions. However, large-scale diversity also can be very challenging, especially when it relates to instruction, content, and pedagogy.

When aligning with Standard 3, institutions will be asked to “indicate by program the intended students and the actual composition of the student population (e.g., whether global, regional, local, or characterized by any specific feature).” Then, institutions will be asked to “describe how the student population the school intends to serve is consistent with the stated mission.”

Standard 3 requires that schools define their intended student populations (whether this is stated within the mission statement or throughout corresponding statements). For example, a school with an objective of serving metro/local students may create a statement for its online program such as: Students for online graduate programs are primarily local-based professionals with three to five years of work experience and a goal of career advancement.

Standard 4: Continuous Improvement Objectives

The school specifies action items that represent high-priority continuous improvement efforts.

Often continuous improvement goals will include objectives that are not specific to either in classroom or online delivery of programs. However, schools starting with the online delivery of programs may devote one or two continuous improvement objectives specifically to this new mode of delivery. These objectives can include a wide variety of areas, from curricula design to the assessment of learning. A few examples include:

- If a school's mission aims to provide high-quality instruction, an objective may include a student-faculty ratio requirement for the new online program.
- If a school's mission strives to expose all students to practical experience, an objective may be to develop internship requirements and real-life projects for all online students.

Standard 5: Financial Strategies

The school has financial strategies to provide resources appropriate to, and sufficient for, achieving its mission and action items.

One of the most controversial factors in the success of any online program is its financial plan. The general perception is that online programs are more efficient and often less expensive to operate; however, nothing could be further from the truth. There are a variety of expenses that are associated with managing high-quality online programs. From the technological platforms (that must be built/bought, housed, maintained, and expanded) to the faculty that must be able to effectively transfer knowledge electronically, an online program requires not only a solid structure but also a solid financial model.

All of the AACSB Accreditation Eligibility Criteria and Standards should be reviewed carefully when developing an online program. Documentation should be composed side-by-side with the new program and display alignment with the accreditation standards. Developing an online program should be a strategic decision that is planned and implemented carefully, keeping in mind the objective of providing high-quality educational experiences to students, as well as allowing for on-going continuous improvement.