

THREE CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING ACCREDITATION OF ONLINE PROGRAMS AND SCHOOLS

distance learning, online education, digital learning: credit-granting, technologically-delivered, either teacher or student are in separate locations; may occur in real time (synchronous) or not in real time (asynchronous) or in a hybrid of both synchronous and asynchronous activities

CONSIDERATION ONE: Student enrollment in online courses has increased in the past 15 years and continues to grow (Watson et al., 2014).

In 2002-2003 there were 222,000 high school students enrolled in distance education; approximately 30% of public school districts had high school students enrolled in distance learning

In 2004-2005, there were just over 300,000 enrollments

In 2009-2010 there were 1.3 million high school students enrolled in distance learning; 53% of public school districts had students enrolled in distance learning; [66% in town districts, 56% in rural districts, 45% in suburban districts, 37% in city districts]

In 2014-2015, 1.8 million students enrolled in some type of digital learning

THE BOTTOM LINE: More students have access to more types of digital learning than ever before. Digital learning options are available to many students in a rapidly expanding range of forms, including online courses from multiple sources, dedicated schools built around aggressive digital instruction models, and many digital learning opportunities in traditional school settings.

CONSIDERATION TWO: ONLINE PROGRAMS AND SCHOOLS SERVE A VARIETY OF PURPOSES.

Families and schools enroll students in online courses for a variety of reasons:

- To provide students with opportunities to take courses not otherwise available to them, meeting needs for students in those cases where students do not have access to adequate physical school and course options. Think: home school families and families who live in areas where there is no Lutheran church and/or school
- to take college-level courses, (our Concordia system offers them)
- to personalize student learning
- to provide students with an alternative learning environment (such as to public school) (Means, Bakia, & Murphy, 2014; Queen & Lewis, 2011).
- In addition, five states (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Michigan, and Virginia) require that students take at least one online or blended online and face-to-face course to graduate high school (Watson et al., 2014). The requirement is intended to broaden students' educational experiences to prepare them for college and the workplace.

CONSIDERATION THREE: PRIVATE SCHOOLS LAG BEHIND PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN THEIR USE OF DIGITAL LEARNING. SOME OBSERVATIONS:

For providers of digital content, tools, and devices the money is in the public sector; the public sector is generally a far larger segment—in fact disproportionately larger—for them than the private sector.

The adoption of devices (tablets and laptops) for students is more common than school-wide adoption of digital content or education-specific technology platforms such as learning management systems. Using laptops does not constitute digital literacy. Yet it lends the appearance of 'digital learning.'

Catholic schools and Jewish schools with low student/teacher ratios are using digital learning primarily in an attempt to increase content offerings at lower costs. Because private schools tend to be small, they usually have limited course offerings and thus offer online courses primarily to increase course options for students.

However,

Many parents who select a private school expect the personal touch—personalized learning and high levels of attention from teachers. Schools who have marketed this characteristic cannot easily move to digitalized learning because of the perception that students should be spending time with a human being, not with a device, not realizing that an online synchronous class can be very bit as personal as in a physical classroom.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

For various reasons, online or digital learning is an increasing choice for students and parents. For the sake of our families, NLSA should address the issue of online program and school accreditation.

Accrediting Lutheran online programs and schools addresses the same major concerns that physical programs and schools must address: curricular content, instructional practices, qualified faculty, resiliency of institutional infrastructure, meeting the mission. Without accreditation, students and parents have no assurance that an institution offers quality education. Accreditation through peer review provides not only this assurance but also supports the online program and school in the process of improvement.

By the point, you are thinking, oh this is an interesting phenomenon, but are any Lutheran schools doing this?

Yes, there are Lutheran schools which offer online courses and there is at least one completely online Lutheran school operating. These particular programs and school do not fall into previous accreditation categories.

So, are there existing standards for digital learning programs and schools? Yes, AdvancED, WASC, the Distance Education Accrediting Commission (DEAC), to name a few, have accreditation standards and peer review protocols.

What should NLSA do? Retain/Maintain your existing standards for accreditation but include and/or expand protocols to accredit digital learning for Lutheran programs and schools