

## Foreword

**T**he public debate over the merits of Internet-based distance learning too often consists of high-pitched vitriol and hyperbole. Proponents ooze with blind adoration, declaring that online learning can resolve all the problems confronting traditional education. Opponents insist that courses taught on the net are incapable of living up to the standards of the traditional bricks and mortar classroom.

While many continue to divide themselves into these "for" and "against" camps, a first-of-its-kind study produced by The Institute for Higher Education Policy and sponsored by the National Education Association, the nations' largest professional association of higher education faculty, and Blackboard Inc., a leading Internet education company, brings reason and research data to this overheated debate, providing more tangible measures of quality in distance learning. The study makes clear that distance learning can be quality learning.

*Quality On the Line* identifies 24 benchmarks considered essential to ensuring excellence in Internet-based distance learning. The benchmarks are divided into seven categories of quality measures currently in use on campuses around the nation.

These benchmarks distill the best strategies used by colleges and universities that are actively engaged in online learning, ensuring quality for the students and faculty who use it. This area of study is particularly

important considering the breakneck pace of growth in Internet-based distance learning.

This growth is no surprise. The opportunities for learning and growth online are virtually limitless. Internet-based education transcends typical time and space barriers, giving students the ability to access learning opportunities day and night from every corner of the globe. Coursework can now provide material in highly interactive audio, video, and textual formats at a pace set by the student.

These attributes are very exciting, but drastically different from the traditional classroom-based education. How can a teaching and learning process that deviates so markedly from what has been practiced for hundreds of years maintain quality? Who will be the guardians of quality and the innovators to present material to students in new and engaging ways?

As the nation's largest education union and as a leading online education company, we believe the distance from student to teacher must be measured in results—quality learning—achieved by our students. The benchmarks identified in this study will ensure that as we plunge headlong into a technology-driven future, unions and business help America's campuses remain on the forward edge of quality.

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