

# A Study Produces a List of 24 Benchmarks for Quality Distance Education

BY DAN CARNEVALE

A STUDY of top distance-education programs has led researchers to compile a list of 24 benchmarks that they say can be used by institutions eager to create high-quality offerings.

The review, conducted by the Institute for Higher Education Policy, is a survey of six institutions widely considered to be leading distance-education providers. The researchers' aim was to collect reliable information about what contributes to quality online instruction, rather than the anecdotal evidence on which many educators have been relying.

The study, whose results were released last month, was sponsored by the National Education Association, a faculty members' union, and Blackboard Inc., a company that sells distance-learning software and services to colleges and universities.

The results make clear "that distance learning can be quality learning only if colleges and universities recognize the needs of the students," said Bob Chase, president of the N.E.A.

Among the 24 benchmarks are students' online interaction with

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instructors and other students, fail-safe computer systems, and appropriate support services for both faculty members and students.

"Many of the benchmarks will sound like common sense," Mr. Chase said. "That's because they are."

The study also identified some factors that did not seem to affect the quality of a distance-education program. "We didn't get a sense that class size was an issue," said Jamie P. Merisotis, president of the institute. Courses included in the study ranged in size from 10 students to more than 300, he said, but quality didn't seem to be related to the number of students in the class.

## QUESTIONS ABOUT INCENTIVES

Another fallacy revealed by the study, Mr. Merisotis said, is that institutions must offer professors incentives to encourage more of them to experiment with distance learning. Results of the study, he said, suggest that colleges would benefit more from working with faculty members who start their own distance projects than from forcing others to become involved.

It's difficult to measure how crucial a given benchmark is to the quality of a distance-education program, Mr. Merisotis added. "It

is qualitative," he said. "It is based on what the administration and faculty say is important. We think we have a pretty good handle on the most essential of these benchmarks."

## 'MAKING IT UP AS WE GO ALONG'

Matthew Pittinsky, the chairman and cofounder of Blackboard, said the study was a good first step in

determining what makes a quality distance-education program.

Mr. Merisotis said that because online education is so new, institutions don't have a clear understanding of what is most important to maintaining a good program.

"We're really making it up as we go along in Internet-based education, to a certain degree," Mr. Merisotis said.

Contributors to the study have discussed sponsoring a broader study that would collect information from more than just six institutions.

"Clearly, this is just a first step," Mr. Merisotis said. "What we need is national data."

The institutions in the study were selected independent of their association with Blackboard, the

company's Mr. Pittinsky said. Of the six institutions included in the study, only two are Blackboard clients.

The study will be released in its entirety soon, officials of the institute said. An executive summary of the study can be downloaded now from the institute's World Wide Web site (<http://www.ihep.com/qualityonline.pdf>). ■