



POLICY BRIEF

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U.S. National Standards Proposed for Authorizing Online Learning

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (NC-SARA) is aimed at standardizing regulations that states apply to colleges and universities that seek to offer online or distance-learning courses to their students. The United States' four regional higher education compacts and other higher education associations developed rules to allow institutions to offer online courses within their state and to offer programs in other states. The cost of belonging to the council should reduce institutional costs associated with achieving reciprocity case by case. Institutional fees also will provide the income for NC-SARA, which was established using grant funding. The promulgation of online learning standards may help to ensure that courses meet acceptable minimal expectations; however, standardization may force simplistic approaches to topics or issues better served by innovation, complexity, and flexibility. SARA effectively limits individual institutional control over online course content and quality. A major question is whether states and institutions will sign on for such regulation.

INTRODUCTION

Various U.S. states set different standards for colleges and universities that seek to offer online or distance-learning courses to their students. With financial support from the Lumina Foundation, the nation's four regional higher education compacts (Midwestern Higher Education Compact, New England Board of Higher Education, Southern Regional Education Board, and Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education) and other higher education associations developed benchmarks to establish standardized regulations for online or distance learning. The standards, now being promoted by a newly formed National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (NC-SARA), are intended to make online courses more accessible to students across state lines and to make it easier for states to regulate interstate distance education. In February, Indiana became the first state to

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meet the new national standards (see <http://www.nc-sara.org/content/indiana-approved-first-sara-state>).

DISCUSSION

The NC-SARA initiative was funded by a \$2.3 million grant from Lumina Foundation. Marshall Hill, previously executive director of the Nebraska Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education and a former assistant commissioner with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, was named executive director of NC-SARA last year.

SARA is intended to provide a voluntary, regional approach to state supervision of postsecondary online or distance education. States and institutions of higher learning that choose to participate must agree to operate using common standards and procedures. A goal of the new initiative is to provide a more uniform, less expensive regulatory mechanism for colleges and universities and more defined regulatory responsibilities for states. SARA also intends to provide for resolution of student complaints.

The council first met last November and set annual membership fees at \$4,000 for colleges and universities that enroll between 2,500 and 10,000 full-time students, with \$2,000 or \$6,000 for institutions below or above that range. The fees will support the council post Lumina grant funding and are intended to be less than institutions typically spend. Carl Straumsheim, writing for *Inside Higher Ed* (<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/11/20/distance-education-state-reciprocity-initiative-prepares-welcome-first-members>) notes, “The fees are a fraction of what colleges and universities spend to bring their programs into compliance with state authorization regulations. Based on a survey by the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies, the University Professional and Continuing Education Association and the Sloan Consortium, most institutions expect to spend less than \$10,000 on compliance costs. In reality, universities on average spent between \$30,000 to \$60,000 depending on their size. Private nonprofit four-year institutions spent the most.”

While fees appear not to be causing undue concern, other issues are rising. Many states and institutions are taking a wait-and-see approach. Among the issues are questions about standards versus standardization, academic independence, and the ability to tailor innovative online courses that best match the needs of students. Complexity and flexibility may not be well served by SARA regulations.

Straumsheim also points out that, even if all of the member states in the four regional compacts sign on, not all states will be included. For example, “New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania are not members of any of the organizations, meaning they will either have to sit out, join or affiliate strictly for SARA purposes.”

CONCLUSION

A number of questions remain unanswered regarding this new initiative. At this juncture, perhaps the

most pertinent is, Will states and institutions sign on? If substantial numbers decide not to join NC-SARA, the goals of the new initiative cannot be fully realized. Agreeing to reciprocity, however, will largely remove the institution's prerogative to evaluate distance-education providers on its own. Whether the trade-off in terms of simplified regulations and potentially lower costs is worth it remains a pivotal—and for many states and institutions, unanswered—question.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Expansion of online or distance education beyond state lines has been hampered by the myriad complexities of individual state and institutional regulations and associated costs. The uniformity promised by NC-SARA should ease regulatory and fiscal burdens. However, sufficient questions remain to suggest that caution be exercised before signing on. NC-SARA may well be a productive step toward true Digital Age access to learning across state lines and, eventually, international boundaries. But some serious questions about important details remain to be unresolved.