

Program evaluation

Issue	Variables
Is your program meeting its mission and goals as well as the expectations of the stakeholders and the community?	What is your program's mission; does the mission include specific student populations?
	Are student outcomes meeting program and state expectations? Can improved student outcomes be demonstrated?
	Does your organization conduct an annual program evaluation?
	How satisfied are stakeholders, including students, schools, and parents, with their experience with the program?

Because online learning is still relatively new, online schools sometimes have to demonstrate quality and results in ways that go beyond the requirements that physical schools meet. Supplemental programs, in particular, face the challenge of not being evaluated in the same way as public schools, because they are not responsible for their students' state assessment scores (in most cases). One way that online schools address quality and performance concerns is by commissioning regular program evaluations.

Internal and external evaluations

Program evaluations fall into two categories: internal (conducted by the program staff) or external (conducted by someone outside the organization). Internal evaluations have the advantage of timeliness, as they can generally be scheduled conveniently at any time during the year, and staff that have a thorough knowledge of the program being evaluated.

External evaluations bring a fresh look at a program from someone removed from the pressure of stakeholders or program staff. There are no personal relationships to cloud the examination of the program, and an outside perspective may bring flaws to light that go unseen by staff too close to the situation to recognize the problems. Also, external evaluations often carry greater validity with stakeholders. However, the cost of external evaluations can be high and the process takes additional time to bring the evaluator up to speed on the processes and metrics of the program being evaluated.⁵

Pieces of the evaluation puzzle

Although the specifics of an evaluation vary significantly, an evaluation usually starts with an examination of the program's mission to determine whether it is meeting its organizational goals. If the goal of an online program is to give students more opportunities for recovering course credits in order to graduate, then two evaluation measures could be the number of credit recovery courses being offered, and the graduation rate for students in those courses. If the mission of the online program is to increase 21st century learning opportunities for a district's students, possible evaluation criteria include 1) the number of new courses available to students; 2) the increase in student proficiency in use of Web 2.0 tools; and 3) the increase in teachers' use of Web 2.0 tools in classroom and online instruction.

⁵ Evaluation in Online Learning, L. Pape, M. Wicks, C. Brown, and W. P. Dickson, in *Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning*, 2008, www.kpk12.com; further examples are from this source as well

Evolving Models for Performance Data Systems: Florida Virtual School's Virtual School Administrator

Florida Virtual School (FLVS) is not only the largest online program in the country, but it is also the only program whose funding is based primarily on student achievement instead of measures such as seat time, which are common across K-12 education. With funding based on student achievement, consistent tracking of course progress based on competency becomes critically important not just for students and teachers, but for administrators as well. The FLVS Virtual School Administrator (VSA), a custom program integrated with the program's course management system, has been instrumental in helping FLVS meet this challenge. VSA provides sophisticated functionality to measure ongoing competency throughout each course and performance levels for each student, and consolidates data from the LMS for use by teachers and administrators. The technology staff works closely with instructional and course development personnel to track data and create reports that meet the needs of each department. Dashboards have been created to provide at-a-glance insight into a student's course progress, grade status, a teacher's monthly phone call log, and responsiveness to email, among other data points. All of the operational departments of FLVS participate in defining the data and applications they need to improve their effectiveness and provide a competency-based learning experience for students. The FLVS technology group is working to add predictive analysis capability to the existing system, using historical data and patterns to predict and improve student performance.

Although in-house software development is sometimes the best strategic path, FLVS wants to spend its time educating students—not responding to technology-related help tickets from students and teachers. While the development of VSA has been handled in-house to accommodate the needs of the stakeholders, FLVS made the strategic decision to outsource student help desk and first-line teacher technology support. With the large volume of help tickets encountered by FLVS, a software tool was selected that routes questions and problems to the appropriate technical staff for quick response and generates metrics on the instances of help tickets, the types of problems, how quickly the problems were resolved and who had to be involved in the solutions. Jonathan Beckham, Senior Manager Information Services at FLVS, stresses, “You are not done with the decision on which vendor to use and which software package to buy. With all outsourcing, it is critical for the organization to maintain technical staff to manage and monitor the work of the vendor. Use outsourcing when available and reliable, but be vigilant and establish internal oversight of and management of vendors.”

Evaluations are commonly based on one or more of stakeholder surveys, outcomes data, and reviews of internal processes.

- Surveys may be done of students, parents, teachers, educators in school districts using supplemental online courses, and other stakeholders. They may be done at multiple times of year; for example, students may be surveyed every semester while parents are contacted once per year.

- Outcomes data vary based on program type. Supplemental programs often rely on course completion rates and results of Advanced Placement exams, while full-time programs can report data of state assessments and other measures common to all public schools in a state.
- Internal processes such as course development may be benchmarked against other programs, or standards such as those published by iNACOL. In addition, the evaluation may report financial information, staffing levels, and similar organizational metrics.

Conclusion

Online learning promises cost-effective solutions to the challenges education leaders face in many areas, particularly in difficult economic times. States and districts are increasingly turning to online programs to expand educational opportunity, equity, and access while individualizing learning options for students. This growth in online learning requires that school managers be able to effectively operate and assess their programs.

While most online programs deliver quality curriculum, effective teaching, and improved student outcomes, such positive outcomes are not assured. They are instead a result of forethought and diligent management, starting with defining and planning the online program, and extending through all aspects of management and operations.

The growth of online learning programs, the demands of expanding course offerings, and the need to service different types of students and deliver learning in a variety of formats are just a few elements that illustrate the complexity of running a quality online learning program. Although many existing online learning programs started as an individual vision, created and fostered by a small, dedicated team of teachers and administrators, most programs now recognize the need for processes and procedures that ensure program quality and accountability.

Managing growth, and keeping up-to-date, are two of the issues that online programs commonly face. "One of the next challenges in program management is staying current: currency in teaching skills, currency in course design standards, and currency in technology strategies as broadband access and new online tools bring new instructional opportunities to bear," says Liz Pape, CEO, VHS Global Consortium. "Ubiquitous computing will be demanded by students and improve teaching and learning, but it will require constant evaluation and integration into existing programs."

Online learning is already improving student outcomes, and holds the potential to be a truly transformative element of education in the years ahead. Clayton Christensen, Harvard Business School Professor and one of the authors of *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns*, predicts that in about a decade, half of all high school courses will be online. But previous trends do not guarantee future growth, and online educators recognize that their programs face far greater scrutiny than physical schools.

Regulators and policymakers at the state and federal level often grapple to find the appropriate balance between mandating quality and accountability on the one hand, and allowing room for innovation on the other. Programs that can demonstrate a sensible approach to ensuring quality content in their courses, highly qualified and well-trained teachers, comprehensive student support