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## 3 Questions for an Online Learning Leader

Russell Poulin  
WCET

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## 3 Questions for an Online Learning Leader

Featuring Russell Poulin, Director, Policy & Analysis, WCET—The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) Cooperative for Educational Technologies

*Russ Poulin is a director of policy and analysis for WCET, the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies, which is a national organization focused on the practice, policy, and advocacy of technology-enhanced learning in higher education. Russ directs WCET's state and national policy efforts, research activities, and multi-institution consortial partnerships to improve practices. In 2014, Russ represented the distance education community on the Department of Education's negotiated rulemaking team that considered the Department's proposed state authorization regulations.*

**1 Many who teach online may not be aware of or familiar with regulations from different oversight agencies regarding the state authorization of distance education courses and programs. What information should those involved with online learning be aware of in this era?**

Let's start with a basic piece of civics, the oversight of education is the purview of the states. They have the right to say who can or cannot offer higher education within a state's borders. Typically, that activity focused on institutions that were physically present within a state, such as those owning a building or renting a space on Main Street. For many years, states have had rules about which institutions are under their scrutiny and under what conditions those institutions can conduct activities in a state.

In 2010, the U.S. Department of Education decided to tie eligibility

for federal financial aid to an institution having the proper authorization to serve students in a state. This surprised many of our colleagues at public and nonprofit institutions. Almost none of them had sought the proper authorizations and the task was daunting. Oddly, most of the for-profits were complying with these regulations. It also was a surprise to the state regulators that so many institutions were operating in their jurisdictions without proper approval.

Flash forward to 2017 and there is a new reality:

- On most campuses, someone is finally aware that they are supposed to be authorized where they serve students. Whether they've complied or not is another matter.
- The Department of Education had to reissue its regulation in 2016 and it is set to be enforced on July 1, 2018. However, Congress may

kill that regulation in the next few months.

- Regardless of whether the Department of Education regulation survives or not, the states still expect institutions to follow their laws. Additionally, the 2,700+ institutions offering Tuition Assistance (a form of financial aid) for active duty military students are required to have the proper approvals.
- The State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement (SARA) has made life easier for almost 1,500 campuses and has extended protection to countless students who did not have it before. SARA uses standard criteria to allow an institution to be approved in its home state and for that action to be recognized in all participating states. As of this writing, that includes 47 states and the District of Columbia. California, Florida, and Massachusetts are in a race to be last to join.

There are lots of myths around state authorization including that it is a money-making scheme for states. Very few states recovered the costs of the efforts. The actual focus is on providing consumer protections to students who otherwise would be left to resolving problems on their own. Institutions of all kinds have treated student poorly, whether at a distance or face-to-face. Providing students with some protections is well worth the inconvenience institutions face in being authorized.

## 2 What are some of the most significant issues in e-learning today and what kinds of solutions are being explored?

We are witnessing the withering away of several time-tested and familiar constructs for higher education and technology-mediated education is contributing to that erosion process.

Just in Time Learning—The traditional college education will remain for a long time, as there will be a subset of young people who will want to have that more leisurely experience of a campus learning and social environment. Everyone else will still want education or training, but they will want it now. Traditional age students looking for work and adults upgrading their skills will be much more focused on the amount of time it will take to learn. They have a need and they need to fulfill that need now. Khan Academy and StraighterLine are more academic examples of organizations using the web to get people the skills they need on their own timeline. Coding bootcamps do not ask you to wait until next August (when the next academic year begins) to start your new life. Higher education will be under increasing pressure to respond and educational technologies will be key as the solution will require a mix of prepared videos, lessons, and simulations, along with human intervention.

Alternative credentials—The associate's, bachelor's, master's, and doctorate categories simply do not work for a growing portion of learners. They need to obtain a smaller package of knowledge and skills, and they need

to certified as having reached mastery level. Grades actually (such as a C in a course) often codify that the student HAS NOT reached mastery and are silent on which skills are missing. Is the student missing something fundamental that will keep him or her for succeeding at the next level or did the student master the work, but was downgraded for turning in an assignment late? Each of the armed services just mapped all of their active-duty jobs to credentials for civilians. The criteria ignored accreditation and worried only about industry-accepted credentials. Meaningful, smaller scale credentials will be demanded by the workforce. Again, educational technologies can be part of that solution.

Alternative providers—There is a growing number of nonaccredited (and often nonregulated) providers of postsecondary education and training. Higher education ignores them at their own risk. States will also have to pay attention to them, because these entities can no longer continue offering high-value credentials at a significant cost without assuring that student consumers are protected. Many of these providers use education technologies. How can higher education learn from them, improve on their practices, and/

or partner with them?

### **3 Which digital tools do you think are most underutilized in education?**

The world is moving from desktops and laptops to mobile devices. Higher education is making the switch, but they need to follow their students and make the switch. This also opens up new opportunities for learning. How can such tools as Google Maps, augmented reality, and virtual reality change the learning landscape when you are on a mobile platform? Education is no longer watching videos and reading text in your bedroom. There are new opportunities to be become interactive with and to capture your environment. History courses come alive with augmented reality tours of historic downtown. Anatomy courses come alive if I can travel down the aorta to see examples of various obstructions. The mobile world gives us both the freedom and the overwhelming responsibility to make learning mobile...and active. In his book, *Brain Rules*, John Medina talks about the importance of exercise and sensory integration into the learning process. Let's get moving.