

## **Authentication: A Conversation with NEASC**

Authentication, as an issue in online education, has been raised by the passage of the Higher Education Reauthorization act which includes language in the section related to Regional Accrediting Agencies directing them to ensure that their institutions have processes to “*establish that the student who registers in a distance education course or program is the same student who participates and completes the program and receives academic credit.*”

On November 18, the CTDL Executive Council met with Barbara Brittingham, NEASC’s Director of the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, to explore this issue with her. Below is a short summary of that discussion:

**Procedures:** Brittingham described the role of the Regional Accrediting Agencies and the Federal Department of Education in how the law will be interpreted:

- Authentication is a very small part of a very large act. The DOE is in the process of writing a “Dear Colleagues” letter that is currently over 200 pages.
- The DOE has held regional meetings on the law at which NEASC testified.
- The Regional Accrediting Agencies are working together on this issue and NEASC has appointed “Distance Ed,” otherwise known as Charter Oak’s President Klonoski, to serve as their representative to the joint committee which is examining the issues in the law related to distance education.
- She believes that the DOE will create regulations regarding this law through their “negotiated rule-making” process. She doesn’t believe that will happen until the spring when the regional accreditors expect to have a seat at that table.

**NEASC’s assumptions:** Brittingham discussed some basic assumptions around the authentication issue:

- NEASC is looking at pedagogical not technological solutions.
- NEASC is looking at solutions that do not put an undo financial burden on institutions or students.
- NEASC, in general, doesn’t separate out standards by teaching modality. For example, their standards generally use words like “whenever and wherever instruction is offered.”
- Part of NEASC’s job will be to train their teams to look at this issue.
- She believes that the issue here is not really about individual students, but about institutions that give Title IV aid to “phantom” students.

**Issues:** The Executive Committee, with many years of experience administering online courses and programs, discussed several issues:

- Is this about cheating or authentication? It was the consensus of the Executive Committee that cheating is not easier online and, in fact, may be more difficult given the amount of writing students do online, as well as LMS systems that allow for random assignment of questions from large test banks etc.
- The Committee also felt that the issue of authentication (students taking entire classes or programs for someone else) wasn’t a problem that they had ever confronted in over 10

years of offering online classes. They also noted that there are few if any authentication requirements in large lecture classes.

- The Committee felt that if online faculty built good assessment plans using many different methods of assessment including step-based assessments, cheating was much less likely.
- The data shows that in many of Connecticut's institutions, the student taking online courses were also on-ground students at the same college. For example, President Addy noted that only 20% of Tunxis students took online courses exclusively. So, most of these students "are known" at the College.
- Or conversely, as is the case with Charter Oak State College, students work completely at a distance and therefore interact with a wide variety of online service providers – advisors, counselors, financial aid specialists -- outside of their classes. So, as Provost Adams noted, they, too, are "known" at the College.

**What Should You Do Now?** Brittingham addressed those institutions who may be dealing with an accreditation review before all of these issues are addressed:

- While this is the current law, NEASC is not requiring a "solution" now, especially not a technological one.
- You should be prepared to address how your institution approaches the issue through faculty training, instructional design, assessment plans, work with student service providers, course monitoring, or other methods which your institution believes protects the integrity of your online classes and programs.

Review NEASC's DRAFT Guidelines for Evaluation of Distance. A full text of the bill can be found at: [http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=110\\_cong\\_public\\_laws&docid=f:publ315.110.pdf](http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=110_cong_public_laws&docid=f:publ315.110.pdf) .

The authentication language is on page 249 (of the PDF) in Part H- Program Integrity sec. 495. RECOGNITION OF ACCREDITING AGENCY OR ASSOCIATION.

- Feel free to contact Diane Goldsmith, CTDLC Executive Director, with comments and suggestions on these Guidelines and/or the authentication issue. We are aggregating these comments and will be sending them to NEASC.
- Continue to watch the CTDLC Newsletter for updates on Authentication.