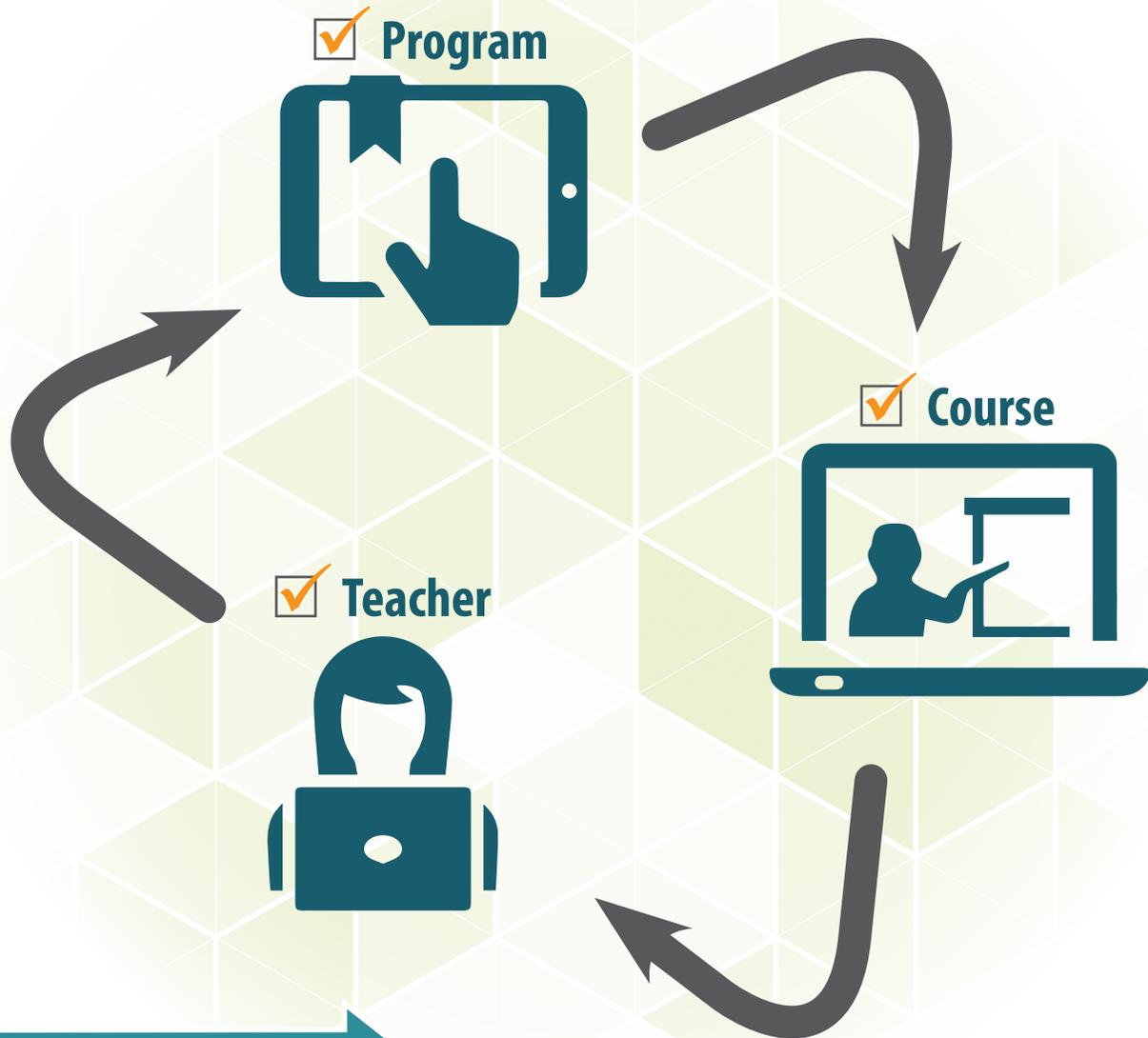


Meeting the Needs of Students with Disabilities in K-12 Online Learning:

An Introduction to the Analysis of the iNACOL Program, Course, and Teacher Standards

December 2016



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About Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute

In 2012, the Governor and Michigan Legislature passed legislation requiring *Michigan Virtual University*® (MVU®) to establish a center for online learning research and innovation, and through this center, directed MVU to work on a variety of projects. The center, known formally as *Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute*™ (MVLRI™), is a natural extension of the work of MVU. Established in 1998, MVU's mission is to advance K-12 education through digital learning, research, innovation, policy, and partnerships. Toward that end, the core strategies of MVLRI are:

- Research – Expand the K-12 online and blended learning knowledge base through high quality, high impact research;
- Policy – Inform local, state, and national public education policy strategies that reinforce and support online and blended learning opportunities for the K-12 community;
- Innovation – Experiment with new technologies and online learning models to foster expanded learning opportunities for K-12 students; and
- Networks – Develop human and web-based applications and infrastructures for sharing information and implementing K-12 online and blended learning best practices.

MVU dedicates a small number of staff members to MVLRI projects as well as augments its capacity through a Fellows program drawing from state and national experts in K-12 online learning from K-12 schooling, higher education, and private industry. These experts work alongside MVU staff to provide research, evaluation, and development expertise and support.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the work of additional contributors to and reviewers of the reports.

Sandra Albert, Director of Exceptional Children Programs
Rowan-Salisbury Schools, Salisbury, NC

Eliz Colbert, Executive Director
North Carolina Virtual Public Schools

Mark Deschaine, Assistant Professor, Project Director of the Lifespan Autism Initiative
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Sarah Gamble, Executive Director of Academics
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Sarah Newman, Supervisor of Special Needs
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Suggested citation: Mellard, D., Rice, M., Pace, J., & Carter, Jr., R. A. (2016). *Meeting the needs of students with disabilities in K-12 online learning*. Lansing, MI: Michigan Virtual University. Retrieved from <http://media.mivu.org/institute/pdf/MeetingNeeds1.pdf>

Introduction

The National Education Policy Center reported that one in 10 students enrolled in a virtual school has a disability, yet virtual schools – be they state or corporate-sponsored – invest little in this population (Molnar, et. al., 2013). Consequences of not meeting the needs of students with disabilities include high attrition and generally poor achievement (Deshler, Rice, & Greer, 2014; Rice, East, & Mellard, 2015b). These unacceptable outcomes are part of the low performance of at-risk students – the fastest growing segment of virtual student enrollments (Miron, 2016).

While many acknowledge that online learning – particularly participation in virtual schooling – holds considerable potential for increased access to different types of courses, credit recovery, and personalization, there is no guarantee that these benefits will be realized on their own (Barbour, Archambault, & DiPietro, 2013). Strategic action from practitioners, researchers, and policy makers in cooperation with virtual school course developers is required. Initial descriptions of what quality programs, courses, and teaching should look like first appeared as iNACOL standards documents in 2009 (Pape & Wicks, 2009). When these documents were first drafted, little was known about what service and instructional delivery for students with disabilities should look like. However, six years ago the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) funded the Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities (COLSD) (<http://centeronlinelearning.org>). This group began conducting studies related to program design, online curriculum, accessibility, inclusion, and educator knowledge around serving students with disabilities. A handful of other researchers not affiliated with the center were also working to make contributions to the understanding of these topics. Since that time, researchers have learned:

1. Teachers who work in online learning environments with students with disabilities construct their roles around monitoring student work, enlisting parents as co-monitors, and providing social and emotional support to students and their families (Rice & Carter, 2015a; Rice & Carter, 2015b);
2. Administrators in online learning environments focus on resolving disputes between teachers and families, counseling students and parents regarding course types and loads, and providing information about compliance with legal mandates to students (Carter & Rice, 2016; Rice & Carter, 2015b);
3. Teachers in online environments receive little initial preparation or subsequent support for instructing students with disabilities; they do receive support for relationship building online (Smith, Basham, Rice, & Carter, 2016);
4. The content of online learning curriculum poses substantial challenges to students with disabilities who have difficulty with reading (Greer, Rice, & Deshler, 2014);
5. Very little research in online learning for students with disabilities has focused on large studies of achievement, and discussion about policy is lacking (Greer, Rice, & Dykman, 2014).

In addition, researchers have outlined several important legalities governing service and instructional delivery in special education settings (Basham, Carter, Rice, & Ortiz, in press; Burgstahler, 2015; Collins, Green, Nelson, & Madahar, 2015; Rice, East, & Mellard, 2015a). Many of these questions are still under consideration, but include:

1. How do concepts of eligibility, assessment, and individualized education plan (IEP) development and implementation apply in online environments with varying amounts of personalization already in place?
2. How are traditional supports for students with disabilities, including modifications and accommodations, changed in an online environment?
3. How are the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) constructs of free appropriate public education (FAPE) and least restrictive environment (LRE) represented in the online environment?
4. What's the best approach for ensuring that students' progress monitoring data are incorporated into curricular, instructional, and placement decisions in their IEPs?
5. What distinctions are relevant between personalization and individualization of instruction and curriculum?

These questions can be more fully addressed when research on students with disabilities in online learning environments is incorporated more fully into program and course development and when teachers have the support and opportunities to develop practical understanding of these challenges.

Reviewing the Standards and Making Recommendations

To improve service delivery online, several researchers at the University of Kansas, who are also affiliated with COLSD, have personally undertaken a review process to incorporate research and practical understanding about serving students with disabilities into the *iNACOL National Standards for Quality Online Teaching* (2011a), *iNACOL National Standards for Quality Online Courses* (2011b), and *iNACOL National Standards for Quality Online Programs* (2011c). These researchers assembled under the commission of the Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute (MVLRI™). This report is part of a series of four reports and includes the introductory information and methodology for the review process. The other three reports in the series are the reviews of the *iNACOL National Standards for Quality Online Teaching*, *iNACOL National Standards for Quality Online Courses*, and *iNACOL National Standards for Quality Online Programs* as well as implications, conclusion, and suggestions for further research for each specific set of standards.

To determine what revisions should be suggested, the researchers used the following procedures:

1. Team members engaged in a thorough review of the existing program, course, and teaching standards (iNACOL, 2011a; Pape & Wicks, 2009)
2. Team members acquired and reviewed recent research and disability legislation, particularly the IDEA (2004) and Sections 504 and 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.
3. Two team members individually reviewed the standards against the research and legislation, beginning with the program standards, noting where the research/laws did not appear or did not support a given standard. Team members then either (a) suggested revisions to the existing standard to include the relevant research/law or (b) proposed a new standard.
4. Team members came together to share their findings and discuss language and other modifications to the standards after their independent reviews. Where disagreement about

the level to which language should be changed, or added arose, a third member contributed additional perspectives.

5. Steps 3 and 4 were repeated for both course and teacher standards.
6. The revised and newly written standards were presented to an invited panel of experts (please see description of expert reviewers below), using Qualtrics survey software, for commentary along the dimensions of (1) relevance to students with disabilities, (2) specificity of language, (3) level of competency needed to perform said standard, and (4) difficulty of implementation. All the dimensions were rated on a five-point scale, except specificity, which was rated on a four-point scale. On all the dimensions, a higher score was desirable and indicated that the standard was of good quality. Separate reviewers were assigned to program, course, or teaching standards depending on their expertise; a total of 12 reviewers rated standards, with four unique raters per standard type.
7. Reviewer feedback was considered, and revisions were made to incorporate reviewer feedback.
8. The revised and newly proposed standards were presented to a focus group of experts, some of whom had provided input via the Qualtrics survey, while others were new to the conversation. These reviewers made further commentary. Again, separate panels were assembled for program, course, and teaching standards. When panelists could not attend the synchronous meeting, they were invited to share their perspectives in individual telephone calls.
9. Final revision and new standards suggestions were delivered to *MVLRI* for inclusion in their larger review of the standards.

During the review process, members of the research team worked to identify individuals who could comment on both online education and students with disabilities. Even so, some reviewers had more experience with only one of these. After an extensive invitation process, six reviewers provided feedback through Qualtrics *or* participated in the discussion group about the program standards, seven reviewers provided feedback through Qualtrics *or* participated in the discussion group about the course standards, and six reviewers provided feedback through Qualtrics *or* participated in the discussion group about the teaching standards. No reviewer served on more than one committee.

During the Qualtrics-based review, almost all the proposed standards rated very high regarding relevance. When standards were rated low, it was due to concerns over the feasibility of implementation to the specificity of the language. The ratings from the Qualtrics-based review were used to guide the teleconference: standards that scored low on one or more dimensions were focal points of the conversation. The key standards addressed in the teleconference, as well as the dimensions they were rated low on, are highlighted in the tables contained in the respective program, course, and teaching suggestions documents (i.e., reports two, three, and four, respectively). These tables include the specific scores assigned to each standard on each of the four rating dimensions. In conducting the teleconference with the reviewers, researchers were advised to shift several of these problematic standards to other domains. For instance, the course standard about scaffolding and supporting students was regarded to be more of a responsibility of the teacher rather than the course designer because course designers typically do not interact directly

with children. Other standards, such as those dealing with accessibility in the course standards and adherence to the policy of “no reject” from IDEA in the program standards were deemed difficult to implement. These difficulties arose from a lack of awareness on the part of online educators, course designers, or program administrators. In these cases, the standards (despite being identified as difficult to implement) were retained as a ballast to give guidance to professional development and, where possible, initial preparation of teachers for online learning environments.

Thus, following the stages of standards review and revision described above, final versions of proposed revisions to the *iNACOL National Standards for Quality Online Programs*, *iNACOL National Standards for Quality Online Courses*, and *iNACOL National Standards for Quality Online Teaching* were created. These proposed revisions can be seen alongside their original forms in the second, third, and fourth reports in this series, respectively. These reports also include a justification for the indicated changes that stem from cited research or law.

Implications, Conclusion, and Future Research

Moving forward, we hope that the iNACOL standards committee will consider including our suggested revisions and additional standards for online programs, courses, and teachers as they review and update the standards.

For practitioners, the revised standards should provide clarity regarding what aspects of disability service delivery are most vulnerable in the online environment. These standards should help inform areas of educator preparation, as well as practice. Moving forward, targeted efforts to maximize the adoption of such standards by teacher educators and education agencies will be key to leveraging the revisions of these standards to benefit significant changes in practice.

Using this information, various entities can determine which elements of disability services can be addressed in program design, which are better suited to course design, and which should be the primary responsibilities of teachers. In completing this revision process, researchers saw the importance of identifying strong professional development for educators at all levels around legalities of IDEA and sections 504 and 508 of the Americans with Disabilities Act. However, it also became clear that the program directors have responsibilities to:

- Determine what data to gather,
- Decide who will see the data,
- Decide how the data will be used to serve students with disabilities, and
- Monitor course design and teacher work.

In turn, course designers should be developing courses that consider

- National and state standards,
- Reading demands of required texts,
- Accessibility of content (bandwidth length as well as learner variability), and
- Types of data that provide information for the range of learners.

Finally, teachers have primary responsibilities for understanding individualization techniques and strategies for implementing IEPs, building relationships with students and parents that allow them to learn relevant information that goes uncollected by course systems, and providing feedback to course designers and program directors. With these roles in place, the revision suggestions provide practical ways for programs to increase the enrollment, retention, and completion of students with disabilities and provide topics for guidance in professional development based on roles and responsibilities.

For researchers, the revised standards provide opportunities to measure student achievement for students with disabilities in accordance with specific guidelines and procedures designed to support them. Areas that will be important to study include A) the adoption of these standards and how they are implemented by different agencies, and B) respective differences in measured as well as perceived success of students with disabilities in schools that use these standards compared with those that do not.

For future policy on online learning, these standards will inform guidelines and policies for K-12 online learning as they relate to how students move into the environments as they enroll, through the environment as they persist in the course, and out of the environment as they matriculate. Moving out of the environment may mean returning to a traditional setting, enrolling in a university or post-high school training context, or entering the workforce. Managing these transitions is important for all students but critical for students with disabilities and mandated by IDEA. The transition process can include regular orientation processes that include a review of the IEP that engages stakeholders in planning for what will happen with students when they start to struggle, when the course is over, when students move to a new virtual environment, or when graduation occurs. The suggested revisions to the standards will give students with disabilities in online learning the visibility needed to make it into additional state and national conversations about making online learning a viable option for all P-12 students. As practice, research, and policy come together via these new standards, close collaborations between various entities concerned with disability services are possible.

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