The NEA Online Degree Program Evaluation Criteria comprise a quality rubric that serves as a guideline for assessing online degree programs. This rubric was designed as part of the formation of the NEA Academy, the Association’s arm for education and professional development, to ensure that the highest quality college and university programs are offered to NEA members and to represent a standard by which online institutions of higher education may be examined. Additionally, the NEA wishes to prevent exploitation of students, faculty, or staff by any institutions of higher education, and ensure that NEA’s partner institutions promote desirable and ethical industry practices as well as adhere to all federal program rules, regulations, laws, and standards.

The quality rubric that was adopted is broadly applicable to the evaluation of any higher education institution’s online degree programs, regardless of the institution’s funding or tax status (i.e., public or private; for profit or non-profit). The Association has decided to make the criteria available to the public to assist all potential students and their families in identifying appropriate, high-quality online programs.

Both the institution and the student should engage in a realistic assessment of the student’s potential for success in an online program. The NEA Academy does not advocate that online education is right for everyone. Institutions that specialize in online education must be able to assess and evaluate students’ potential for success in online programs. A number of factors contribute to whether students are good candidates for online education, and these factors are important in shaping the institution’s student outreach/recruitment practices and policies and in determining whether an online institution is the right choice for a particular student.

Likewise, each individual considering enrollment in an online program must assess his/her own motivation, skills, and rationale for entering an online institution rather than a traditional classroom setting. Students who undertake an online program should exhibit such characteristics as inner motivation, independent learning style, and a level of study skills and ability to be self-starters and to manage the demands of independent learning. Being technologically prepared is also important and more complex than it might initially appear, even to digital natives. To participate successfully in these programs, students need good equipment, a learning-conducive environment, and reliable, high-speed internet access.

The NEA Online Degree Program Evaluation Criteria are divided into four categories:

1. Institution quality and engagement
2. Content and program quality
3. Accreditation
4. Student services

In developing these criteria, NEA sought to serve its members by ensuring the quality of the Association’s educational partners and of the online degree programs and courses these institutions provide to NEA members to meet their educational needs. Additionally, the Association wished to provide a set of standards that can be used by other organizations as well as individuals to examine and assess online education institutions and programs.
Institution Quality and Engagement

The quality of a higher education institution is measured in many ways. As its foundation, the institution must adhere to ethical business practices; provide ethical and fair treatment and engagement of faculty, staff, and students; focus on the success of its students as measured by graduation rates, employment, and repayment of students loans (default rates); engage in inclusionary practices and treatment of faculty and students of diverse backgrounds; and adhere to admission practices that are fair, clearly articulated, and supported by advisors.

Business Practices

All governmental requirements at the federal and state levels must be met and must demonstrate that the institution performs in an ethical manner. The institutional policies and practices in working with faculty, staff and students must be transparent and appropriate.

Following are the criteria to be used in examining an institution's business practices:

1. Transparency and integrity in all federal, state, financial, faculty/staff, and student practices
2. Disclosure/reporting of current or past labor disputes
3. No evidence of any deceptive or fraudulent business practices or U.S. Department of Education complaints
4. Percentage of budget spent on marketing for student recruitment (if available)
5. Disclosure of federal and private student loan default rates
6. Costs/fees clearly articulated

Faculty/Staff

The roles and responsibilities of faculty need to be clearly articulated. Faculty must have suitable qualifications in order to appropriately serve the students (e.g., a doctoral degree for any professor supervising doctoral candidates), as well as proper credentials from accredited universities.

Following are criteria that can be used in examining an institution’s practices concerning faculty and staff:

1. Clarity of roles and responsibilities
2. Qualifications of faculty
3. Faculty senate (elected or appointed)
4. Faculty input into courses
5. Student-faculty ratio

Graduation/Program Completion Rates

Institutions will share their documented and nationally reported rates of degree program completion (i.e., graduation rates), as well as information on how many students actually acquired positions in their field (job placement) and how long it took students to complete their degrees or programs.

Following are the criteria to be used in examining an institution’s graduation and program completion rates:

1. Overall rates of program completion
2. Job placement figures
3. Figures for average time to complete degrees/programs

Diversity

Institutions will demonstrate their ongoing commitment to diversity and inclusionary practices related to faculty, administrative staff, and students through such means as their mission statement, policies, and/or procedures.

Following are the criteria to be used in examining an institution's inclusionary practices related to the diversity of faculty, staff, and students:

1. Institution mission statement, policies, and procedures
2. Diversity figures for faculty and administrative staff
3. Diversity figures for students

Administration

The institution will provide information about its origin and its administration’s leadership structure. A listing of relevant awards and recognition in the area of content or online/distance education will also be provided. Currently, a minimum of five years of experience in providing online learning is the standard for consideration as an NEA institutional partner. An important part of the administrative structure is the existence of a process by which faculty, staff, and students can resolve disputes.

Following are the criteria to be used in examining an institution’s administrative structure:

1. Leadership
2. Reputation/awards/recognition
3. Dispute resolution process for faculty, staff, and students
4. Ratio of administration to faculty

Admission and Enrollment

The institution’s admissions and enrollment process must be transparent and fair. Support to aid students with this process should be offered both online and via telephone, and a faculty advisor or enrollment advisor also needs to be available to aid students.

Following are the criteria to be used in examining an institution’s admission and enrollment process:

1. Online and telephone support
2. Faculty or enrollment advisor
3. Clear process for transfer of credits
4. Acceptance of transfer of credit or “testing” of competencies for credit
Content and Quality

NEA considers the content and quality of degree programs and individual courses to be of the utmost importance. Everyone deserves learning opportunities that are of the highest quality and meet the highest standards. Content and quality indicators address design, development, and delivery of courses and programs, as well as course format, evaluation, and assessment. For online learning, technology adds another layer that needs to be assessed for quality and compatibility with standard PC and Apple computers.

Programs

The institution must maintain an active program design feature by surveying students to understand the needs of the marketplace and ensure that program and course content are relevant and suitable for a significant portion of students.

Following are the criteria to be used in examining an institution’s programs:

1. Availability of education programs to meet student-identified needs (math, ELL, etc.)
2. Range of available programs to meet all student-identified and broader marketplace needs (bachelor’s, doctorates, etc.)

Program Quality

Program quality should also be examined in terms of its alignment with current research in professional development. For educators and non-educators alike, the learning should be applicable to the individual’s specific career and/or position, whether that is as a classroom teacher or an individual working in an office. Evidence must be provided to show that the institution has internal processes for program quality review.

Following are the criteria to be used in examining an institution’s program quality:

1. Aligns with current research in online education
2. Applicability of learning to individual’s position (classroom vs. non-classroom)
3. Programs and courses reviewed regularly

Course Structure

Not all students learn in the same way or at the same pace. Individuals should look for programs that offer flexibility and options in such areas as accommodation of different learning styles, pacing of courses/programs, and start dates.

Following are the criteria to be used in examining an institution’s course structure:

1. Options for addressing varied learning styles
2. Options for courses offered on regular schedule or self-paced (depending on learning option chosen by student)

Evaluation and Assessment

The grading and assessment processes must be articulated and transparent. The ongoing processes for the institution’s continual efforts at improvement need to be outlined, and the dispute resolution process needs to be clearly outlined and communicated to students and faculty.

Following are the criteria to be used in examining an institution’s evaluation and assessment processes:

1. Transparency of grading and assessment processes
2. Ongoing internal and external processes for content quality
3. Dispute resolution process for students and faculty

Course Delivery and Technology

The institution’s technology platform must provide secure and customizable access and be usable on all standard computer configurations to meet current and steadily evolving student learning and instructional requirements.

Following are the criteria to be used in examining an institution’s course delivery and technology:

1. Platform features, security, and capability to include ease of use, features, access to learning communities, etc.
2. Compatibility with standard PC and Apple computers
3. Institutional support for online education (e.g., years of experience, budget, belief statements)

Accreditation

Accreditation indicates that the institution and its programs meet the standards acceptable at the program and institutional levels, and is therefore a critical factor in even considering an institution.

Regional and National Accreditation Agencies (NCATE, if applicable)

Six regional accreditation agencies are currently responsible for ongoing assessment of institutional standards and practices. For teacher-specific programs, NCATE is NEA’s standard for accreditation. For non-education areas of study, industry standards and certifications must be met.

Certification/Licensure

For institutions providing certificates or licensure to students, the institution must meet all industry standards and provide students with advisors and support, regardless of where they live. Some individuals may be seeking additional licensure/certification, while others may be seeking initial certification. Therefore, the institution should provide support to individuals enrolling in a program to ensure that the education program they are completing will meet the regulations in their current state, or the state of their choosing (if they plan to move). Any limitations must be clearly identified and communicated.
Following are the criteria to be used in examining an institution’s support for students seeking certification or licensure programs:
1. Support for students seeking licensure (in one or more states)
2. Clear descriptions of licensure programs offered (and in what states)
3. Transparency of licensure offerings and support

Student Services
Students at partner institutions deserve support in such areas as: counseling, online learning readiness, orientation, technical, library/media services, financial aid, access to services for those with disabilities, and business operations with the institution. These support systems, available at most universities, are expected and needed in the world of online learning as much, if not more so, than they would be in a brick-and-mortar university.

Student Support
Higher education institutions should provide an assessment and orientation for students entering into the online learning environment. Counselors should be available to aid with enrollment, career planning, personal needs, and financial aid. Being able to communicate with instructors is imperative. Institutions must adhere to any current or future federal regulations related to serving students with disabilities.

Following are the criteria to be used in examining an institution’s overall support for its students:
1. Compliance with 508 regulations concerning accessibility for individuals with disabilities
2. Assessment of student readiness and appropriateness of online learning for student’s lifestyle
3. Orientation for online learning format
4. Availability of counselors (enrollment, career, general, financial aid, etc.)
5. Providing students with information on instructors’ office hours and/or other means of contacting for assistance (e.g., online, phone)

Technical Support
To ensure that online learners have several options for obtaining assistance, technical support should be offered via telephone as well as online. The hours of operation should be extensive enough to meet the needs of online students and ensure that their learning is not impaired by technology issues.

Following are criteria that can be used in examining an institution’s technical support for its students:
1. Platform and systems adequate to support needs of students, faculty, and staff
2. Online and telephone support options
3. Adequate hours of operation
4. Clear identification of technology needed for courses

Library/Media Services
Online students must be able to easily access their course materials and library/media services in order to complete their assignments in the online environment. Access procedures should be clearly outlined in student materials.

Following are the criteria to be used in examining an institution’s library/media services for its students:
1. Access to online and print materials needed for coursework and research

Financial Aid and Business Transactions
As a benefit to its members, the NEA engages in business relationships with institutions to offer online courses and programs at reduced member prices. Regardless of NEA membership, the charges for online students should not include or be based on out-of-state tuition. Additionally, any student may require financial aid, and financial aid counselors or officers need to be available to assist students with information on scholarships, loans, or grants available. Students should also be informed of upcoming tuition and fee increases well in advance.

Following are criteria that can be used in examining an institution’s support for students in the areas of financial aid and business transactions:
1. No out-of-state tuition
2. Advisors to aid with information and applications for scholarships, grants, and loans
3. Advance notification of planned tuition/fee increases