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Distance education quality standards for Latin America and the Caribbean

By Deborah A. Benedetti



Dr. Patricia A. Book, associate vice president for outreach and executive director of the Division of Continuing Education at Penn State, and Dr. Luis Miguel Romero, rector of the Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja in Ecuador, are participating in a project to develop quality standards for distance education programs in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Photos by Dick Ackley—Penn State Image Resource Center

Penn State faculty and staff members are working with colleagues at the Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja in Loja, Ecuador, on a project to develop standards of quality for distance education programs in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The new Virtual Center for the Development of Quality Standards for Higher Distance Education in Latin American and the Caribbean is funded by a 12-month \$200,000 grant from the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB). IADB is a development institution established to accelerate economic development in Latin America and the Caribbean. CREAD, The Inter-American Distance Education Consortium, is part of the coordinating committee for the project.

The project evolved from discussions CREAD and higher education institution representatives had with the Inter-American Development Bank in 2000 about the need for quality standards for distance education in Latin America and the Caribbean, according to **Dr.**

Armando Villarroel, executive director of CREAD, which is headquartered at Penn State.

Villarroel discussed the project with **Dr. Patricia A. Nelson**, associate dean of Outreach, Cooperative Extension, Technology and International Programs in the College of Education, who crafted the original proposal to the Inter-American Development Bank. She also told him about **Dr. Kyle Peck** and his team, who are engaged in developing a system of standards for elementary and secondary education, funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education.



“Dr. Peck made a presentation on his project, and we were sold,” Villarroel said. “When we presented the idea for the Virtual Center for the Development of Quality Standards for Higher Distance Education to the Inter-American Development Bank, the bank representatives agreed to fund the project.”

Peck, professor of education and head of the Department of Adult Education, Instructional Systems and Workforce Education and Development in the College of Education, leads the Penn State team, which includes senior project associates **Dr. J. David Popp** and **Dr. Catherine L. Augustine** and graduate assistants **Sandeep Wallia**, **Martin Yeh** and **Noela Houghton**, who are from India, Taiwan and Canada, respectively. They are developing a database of quality standards that can be used by higher education institutions throughout Latin America and the Caribbean to evaluate the quality of distance education programs available from institutions around the world.

As Peck puts it, “The system we are creating will allow scholars from many Latin American nations to think together about the attributes of high-quality, effective distance education, delivered via a variety of media. This system lets us capitalize on the wisdom that

Roberto Beltrán (left), executive vice president of the Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja in Ecuador, and Ramiro Cárdenas, vice president for administration at the university, participate in a planning session at Penn State for a project to develop quality standards for distance education programs in Latin America and the Caribbean.



From left, Carlos Correa, information technology director and director of the Virtual Campus at the Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja in Ecuador; Jean F. Pritchard, program assistant with CREAD—The Inter-American Distance Education Consortium; Dr. Kyle Peck, professor and head of the Penn State Department of Adult Education, Instructional Systems and Workforce Education and Development; and Dr. J. David Popp, senior project associate in the College of Education, review a presentation about the Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja.



resides in many locations and to make databased decisions that result in outstanding learning experiences that fit with the diverse local cultures. As the old saying goes, 'All of us is smarter than any of us.'"

The Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja is hosting the new center and maintaining the computer database.

An academic group is developing the quality standards. The group includes representatives from the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia in Spain, the University of British Columbia and the Universidad Nacional Abierta in Venezuela.

In addition, an academic committee of 12 higher education institutions in the Western Hemisphere is helping to guide the project ([see sidebar](#)).

At a planning meeting held at Penn State, **Carlos Correa**, information technology director and director of the Virtual Campus at the Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja, showed a video presentation about the Loja university.

After viewing the video, **Dr. Patricia A. Book**, associate vice president for outreach and executive director of the Division of Continuing Education at Penn State, said, "We have so much in common. We share with you the goal of integrating teaching, research and service. And we face some of the same educational challenges. The stakes are very high for all participants in this project. Education and access to education is the path to broader prosperity, safer environments and stable economies."

Dr. Luis Miguel Romero, rector of the Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja, said the time was right for creating a Virtual Center for the Development of Quality Standards for Higher Distance Education. He expressed his appreciation to CREAD for fostering the new relationship between his university, Penn State and the Inter-American Development Bank.

It is Romero's vision "to join together our people, our culture and our wisdom for a better world for everybody. This project will make real our dream of quality standards for distance education programs in Latin America and the Caribbean."

The project also has the potential to help slow the brain drain taking place in Latin America. Sluggish economies are resulting in people leaving for education and work in other countries. Education is a great equalizer. Latin American countries would like to improve education opportunities in order to retain their best and brightest students to help build stronger economies and create new jobs.

Villarroel said the Virtual Center also will provide a wealth of data and resources for faculty members at participating universities to develop research publications and presentations. In addition, the Inter-American Development Bank may provide funding to expand this project in future years.

During their visit to Penn State, the Ecuadorian educators met with **Dr. Patricia A. Nelson** in the College of Education; **Dr. Wesley E. Donahue**, director of Penn State Management Development Programs and Services; **Dr. Michael E. Ostroski**, director of Penn State Conferences and Institutes; **Dr. Gary E. Miller**, associate vice president for Distance Education and executive director of the Penn State World Campus; **Dr. Lewis Jillings**, associate vice provost, Office of International Programs; **Dr. Stephen M. Smith**, professor of agricultural and regional economics, College of Agricultural Sciences; and **Eileen Pennisi**, coordinator, Education Technology Center, College of Education.

Founded in 1971 to promote peace and social justice, the Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja is governed by the Community of Missionaries Identes. The university offers traditional resident education and distance education in 22 career areas, including

Dr. Armando Villarroel, executive director of CREAD—The Inter-American Distance Education Consortium, based at Penn State, and Dr. Luis Miguel Romero, rector of the Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja in Ecuador, discuss plans for a project to assist higher education institutions in Latin America and the Caribbean in evaluating the quality of distance education programs.

Academic committee to guide project

An academic committee comprised of representatives from 12 higher education institutions in the Western Hemisphere is helping to guide and coordinate a project to develop quality standards for distance education programs in Latin America and the Caribbean. Member institutions are:

- ◆ Universidad Nacional Abierta, Venezuela
- ◆ Universidad Estatal a Distancia, Costa Rica
- ◆ Universidad Nacional Autónoma, Mexico
- ◆ Centro de Ensino a Distancia do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
- ◆ Athabasca University, Canada
- ◆ Universidad Nacional Abierta y a Distancia, Colombia
- ◆ Consorcio de Universidades de Perú, Perú
- ◆ Universidad Católica del Norte, Chile
- ◆ Instituto Universitario Aeronáutico, Argentina
- ◆ Pontificia Universidad Católica Madre y Maestra, Dominican Republic
- ◆ University of West Indies, Jamaica
- ◆ Oklahoma State University, United States

computer science technology, economics, natural resources and the humanities. It also has centers devoted to extension of services, technology transfer and biotechnology, including a laboratory for the conservation and production of orchids. The university has a model dairy facility, a small business incubator and programs for children, youth and families.

Penn State brings to this project its more than 100-year tradition of extending education to the people of Pennsylvania, the nation and the world. In 1892, the University offered its first correspondence courses to farming families. Today, Penn State outreach programming reaches more than 2 million Pennsylvanians and others worldwide, and Penn State World Campus and distance education courses and programs are reaching students in all 50 states and more than 40 countries around the world.

International conference to focus on technology in education and training

By Andrew J. Petkac

International experts from 50 countries will analyze the impact new technologies and e-learning will have on education and society at VIRTUAL EDUCA 2003, a global conference being held for the first time in the United States.

The fourth annual gathering of educators and business leaders will be held from June 18 to 20 at the Miami Convention Center in Miami, Fla. This international conference and exhibit focusing on education, training and new technologies has become a strategic meeting point for universities, international organizations and other key players in technology-supported education and training.

CREAD, The Inter-American Distance Education Consortium, headquartered at Penn State, is among the multinational sponsors of this year's gathering. Other supporting institutions include the Inter-American Agency for Cooperation and Human Development, the Organization of American States, the Inter-American Institute for Social Development, the Inter-American Development Bank and the European Commission.

VIRTUAL EDUCA 2003 will offer a key opportunity for North American universities and educational/technological companies wishing to expand their operations into Latin American and European markets. There will be several specialized workshops, including a briefing for North Americans interested in building relationships with the Latin world.

Experts from the education, government and business sectors will analyze the application of new technologies and information and communication systems to the education and training fields; at the same time, they will examine the role of e-learning in today's society. In addition, the international exhibit area will feature booths and presentations of educational platforms, software, tools, products and services.

VIRTUAL EDUCA maintains a defined Latin American and European focus while emphasizing a global perspective. One of its main distinctions is its trilateral encounter between Latin America, Europe and the United States, with the participation of more than 50 countries at the last meeting, including almost every country in Latin America.

For more information, visit the conference Web site at <http://www.educoas.org/virtualeduca> or contact **Dr. Armando Villarroel**, executive director of CREAD, by phone at 814-863-0488 or by e-mail at axv4@outreach.psu.edu.

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