

Progress report and one recommended action regarding NC-SARA's support for distance education students, SARA states and SARA institutions

ACTION ITEM

Background

In the beginning of SARA, in 2013, the main work of regional and national SARA staff involved explaining (often to quite skeptical audiences) what SARA would do; what would be expected of SARA states and institutions; what institutional activities would and would not be covered by SARA; how SARA institutions in one state would interact with other SARA states; why SARA wouldn't remove institutional obligations regarding the interstate offering of programs leading to professional licensure; and a seemingly never-ending list of related points.

In Spring 2018, with 48 states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Virgin Islands as SARA members, and almost 1,800 institutions now participating in SARA, SARA staff still spend a great deal of time dealing with what are now increasingly nuanced versions of those and other questions. An institutional representative might ask: "My institution is thinking about doing THIS. Will that be covered by SARA?" Students ask, "Why does our physical therapy program director say that I can't do a clinical rotation in a non-SARA state? And why is SARA trying to keep me from graduating?"

In May 2017 the NC-SARA Board approved a budget funding enhanced student, state and institutional support to be provided by NC-SARA on topics related to state authorization. In September, 2017, Mary Larson (previously at SREB) joined NC-SARA as Associate Director for Student and Institutional Support; and in April, 2018, Marianne Boeke (previously with NCHEMS) joined NC-SARA as Associate Director for Policy Research and State Support. One additional budgeted position related to their work has not yet been filled (April 2018).

Activities report (no action needed)

NC-SARA has begun several projects that bear on this provision of additional support:

- In cooperation with the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies' State Authorization Network (WCET/SAN), NC-SARA has reached an agreement with the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) to house and maintain what has been SHEEO's database resource of state regulatory agencies and state licensing boards that deal with state authorization. The work of updating and transferring that resource has begun; and anticipated launch on the NC-SARA website is early summer, 2018.
- NC-SARA is developing a separate database of commonly asked questions about state authorization: how authorization requirements affect students, how authorization requirements affect students studying in programs intended to lead to professional licensure, and related issues. That content work has begun, as has the IT work to support it; and anticipated availability is summer 2018. NC-SARA staff (and others) have planned a series of webinars addressing those topics.
- The Executive Director has had many conversations with leaders of specialized accrediting bodies that also struggle providing answers to such questions. NC-SARA staff will be working with those organizations and their umbrella organization to enable their linking to general information about state authorization of distance education housed on the NC-SARA website.

NC-SARA will provide links to discipline-specific information housed on the websites of those organizations. Responses from those organizations have been uniformly supportive.

- NC-SARA's website (www.nc-sara.org) was developed and launched in the fall of 2013. The material it contains has grown, without sufficient, subsequent attention to organization, ease of access, data analytics, and so forth. NC-SARA has contracted with an external firm for a thorough re-examination of its web needs and resources and a redesign of the website. That work has begun, as well, with an anticipated launch of the new website in summer 2018.
- These four projects will be accomplished within the "Phase I Student and Institution Support" budget approved by the Board in May 2017.

An additional resource

ACTION ITEM

NC-SARA staff recommends that NC-SARA create a searchable database of academic programs offered at a distance by SARA institutions. Key points:

- Institutional participation would be voluntary and carry no additional cost to participating SARA institutions.
- Institutions could cease participation at any point.
- Available programs would be searchable by discipline, degree level, etc.
- Searching students would be directed from the results of their search (a listing of institutions offering their sought-for programs) to an institutional web page (maintained by the institution) from which additional information about the institution and its available distance education programs could be readily accessed. From that institutional page forward, students would deal with the institution, not NC-SARA.
- Prior to inclusion of their programs, institutions would be required to certify that all programs they list in the database have been approved for institutional offering by whatever approval mechanism their state requires.
- Institutions would be required to maintain accurate, up-to-date information of their listed programs would be removed from the database.
- Database entries would be coordinated with any existing SARA states' databases of distance education programs offered by those states' institutions.
- The database would be maintained by NC-SARA.

Rationale

- No such searchable database currently exists.
- Rather than a broad search through an internet search engine (*Google, Chrome, Safari, etc.*), a focused search through such an NC-SARA database would identify only those institutions that participate in SARA and therefore meet SARA requirements regarding accreditation, *C-RAC Guidelines*, financial stability, complaint resolution and state approval.

- Identified institutions, through their participation in SARA, would have satisfied the state authorization requirements of all SARA member states, territories and districts, removing a potential complication for searching students. (Issues related to professional licensure would have to be individually resolved through student consultation with the institution, as is the case for all such inquiries.)
- NC-SARA could develop and maintain such a resource within current and anticipated institutional fee revenues. Implementation year costs would be approximately \$300,000 (excluding staff time); successive year costs would be approximately \$83,000/year (excluding staff time).
- If approved, NC-SARA would likely be ready to accept institutional program listings by late 2018 or early 2019.

Precedent and previous efforts

- From 1998 to 2017, the Southern Regional Education Board operated the *SREB Electronic Campus*, which offered a similar searchable database of academic programs and courses (an NC-SARA database would list *programs*, not *courses*, simplifying operation).
- More than 350 institutions across 16 southern states participated, listing approximately 10,000 academic programs. An NC-SARA project would build on lessons learned from that work.
- Significant state and institutional participation was sustained throughout the 19-year existence of the *Electronic Campus*.
- To support a national reciprocity agreement (SARA), rather than the regional one on which the SREB Electronic Campus was based (SECRRA), SREB closed their *Electronic Campus* in July 2017.
- Many institutions that participated in the *SREB Electronic Campus* – institutions that know best how such an initiative would work – are eager to participate if such an opportunity were to be made available through NC-SARA.

Feedback from SARA institutions and others

In April 2018 NC-SARA provided all SARA institution contacts an overview of the proposed project and solicited their feedback. Such solicitation was also made through the NC-SARA website. At the May NC-SARA meeting, staff will summarize responses.

Staff recommendation:

Direct NC-SARA staff to:

- Create and maintain a searchable database of academic programs available through distance education and offered by SARA institutions that voluntarily choose to list such programs in the database;
- Publicize the availability of the database;
- Include funding for related work in annual NC-SARA operating budgets; and
- Collect, maintain, analyze data and periodically report to the Board on utilization of the database.