

Policy on Distance Education and on Correspondence Education

*(Adopted June 2001; Edited August 2004; Revised June 2005, January 2010, June 2011;
Edited August 2012)*

Background

Recognizing that most accredited institutions are making use of the growing range of modalities for delivery of instructional and educational programs and services, including various electronic means, the Commission has adopted a policy based on principles of good practice to help ensure that distance learning is characterized by the same expectations for quality, integrity, and effectiveness that apply to more traditional modes of instruction.

This policy reflects the federal regulatory requirements regarding distance education and correspondence education.

Definition of Distance Education (34 C.F.R. § 602.3.)

Distance Education means:

Education that uses one or more of the technologies listed in paragraphs (1) through (4) to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor, either synchronously or asynchronously. The technologies may include:

- (1) the internet;
- (2) one-way and two-way transmissions through open broadcast, closed circuit, cable, microwave, broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite, or wireless communications devices;
- (3) audioconferencing; or
- (4) video cassettes, DVDs, and CD-ROMs, if the cassettes, DVDs, or CD-ROMs are used in a course in conjunction with any of the technologies listed in paragraphs (1) through (3).

Definition of Correspondence Education (34 C.F.R. § 602.3.)

Correspondence education means:

- (1) education provided through one or more courses by an institution under which the institution provides instructional materials, by mail or electronic transmission, including examinations on the materials, to students who are separated from the instructor.
- (2) interaction between the instructor and the student is limited, is not regular and substantive, and is primarily initiated by the student.
- (3) correspondence courses are typically self-paced.
- (4) correspondence education is not distance education.

Policy

Commission policy specifies that all learning opportunities provided by accredited institutions must have equivalent quality, accountability, and focus on student outcomes, regardless of mode of delivery. This policy provides a framework that allows institutions the flexibility to adapt their delivery modes to the emerging needs of students and society while maintaining quality. Any institution offering courses and programs through distance education or correspondence education is expected to meet the requirements of accreditation in each of its courses and programs and at each of its sites.

Policy Elements

- development, implementation, and evaluation of all courses and programs, including those offered via distance education or correspondence education, must take place within the institution's total educational mission.
- institutions are expected to control development, implementation, and evaluation of all courses and programs offered in their names, including those offered via distance education or correspondence education.
- institutions are expected to have clearly defined and appropriate student learning outcomes for all courses and programs, including those delivered through distance education or correspondence education.
- institutions are expected to provide the resources and structure needed to accomplish these outcomes and to demonstrate that their students achieve these outcomes through application of appropriate assessment.
- institutions are expected to provide the Commission advance notice of intent to initiate a new delivery mode, such as distance education or correspondence education, through the substantive change process.
- institutions are expected to provide the Commission advance notice of intent to offer a program, degree or certificate in which 50% or more of the courses are via distance education or correspondence education, through the substantive change process. For purposes of this requirement, the institution is responsible for calculating the percentage of courses that may be offered through distance or correspondence education.
- institutions which offer distance education or correspondence education must have processes in place through which the institution establishes that the student who registers in a distance education or correspondence course or program is the same person who participates every time in and completes the course or program and receives the academic credit¹. This requirement will be met if the institution verifies the identity of a student who participates in class or coursework by using, at the institution's discretion, such methods as a secure log-in and password, proctored examinations, other technologies and/or practices that are developed and effective in verifying each student's identification. The institution must also publish policies that ensure the protection of student privacy and will notify students at the time of class registration of any charges associated with verification of student identity 34 C.F.R. § 602.17(g).

¹ See Addendum: WCET Best Practice Strategies to Promote Academic Integrity in Online Education Version 2.0, June 2009.