Southern Association of Colleges and Schools
Commission on Colleges
1866 Southern Lane
Decatur, Georgia 30033-4097

DISTANCE EDUCATION AND CORRESPONDENCE COURSES

Policy Statement

Definition of Distance Education

For the purposes of SACSCOC's accreditation review, distance education is a formal educational process in which the majority of the instruction (interaction between students and instructors and among students) in a course occurs when students and instructors are not in the same place. Instruction may be synchronous or asynchronous. A distance education course may use the internet; one-way and two-way transmissions through open broadcast, closed circuit, cable, microwave, broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite, or wireless communications devices; audio conferencing; or other digital media if used as part of the distance education course or program.

Definition of Correspondence Courses

Correspondence courses are part of a formal educational process 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. Interaction between the instructor and the student is limited, is not regular and substantive, and is primarily initiated by the student; courses are typically self-paced.

Standards and Policy Statements

1. At the time of review by SACSCOC, the institution demonstrates that the student who registers in a distance or correspondence education course or program is the same student who participates in and completes the course or program and receives the credit by verifying the identity of a student who participates in class or coursework by using, at the option of the institution, methods such as (1) a secure login and password/passcode, (2) proctored examinations, and (3) new or other technologies and practices that are effective in verifying student identification (See Standard 10.6 [*Distance and correspondence education*]).

2. At the time of review by SACSCOC, the institution demonstrates that it has a written procedure for protecting the privacy of students enrolled in distance and correspondence education courses or programs (See Standard 10.6 [*Distance and correspondence education*]).

3. At the time of review by SACSCOC, the institution demonstrates that it has a written procedure distributed at the time of registration or enrollment that notifies students of any projected additional student charges associated with verification of student identity (See Standard 10.6 [*Distance and correspondence education*]).

4. An institution that offers distance education or correspondence courses must ensure that it reports accurate

headcount enrollment on its annual Institutional Profile submitted to SACSCOC (See SACSCOC's policy *Integrity and Institutional Obligations to* SACSCOC).

5. Institutions must ensure that their distance and correspondence education courses and programs comply with the *Principles of Accreditation*. This applies to all educational programs and services, wherever located or however delivered (See Standard 14.3 [*Comprehensive institutional reviews*]).

Guidelines in the Application of the Principles of Accreditation to Distance Education and Correspondence Courses

With the underlying concept that the *Principles of Accreditation* apply to all educational courses and programs of the institution, regardless of mode of delivery, institutions should consider the following guideline statements in implementing and reporting on distance education programs and correspondence courses.

Mission

If distance education programs and/or correspondence courses are a significant part of the institution's educational enterprise, the institution's mission should reflect that characteristic.

Curriculum and Instruction

The faculty assumes primary responsibility for and exercises oversight of distance education and correspondence courses, ensuring both the rigor of programs and the quality of instruction.

The technology used is appropriate to the nature and objectives of the programs and courses, and expectations concerning the use of such technology are clearly communicated to students.

Distance and correspondence education policies are clear concerning ownership of materials, faculty compensation, copyright issues, and the use of revenue derived from the creation and production of software, courses, or other media products.

Academic support services are appropriate and specifically related to distance and correspondence education.

Program length is appropriate for each of the institution's educational programs, including those offered through distance education and correspondence courses.

For all degree programs offered through distance education or correspondence courses, the programs embody a coherent course of study that is compatible with the institution's mission and is based upon fields of study appropriate to higher education.

For all courses offered through distance education or correspondence, the institution employs sound and acceptable practices for determining the amount and level of credit awarded and justifies the use of a unit other than semester credit hours by explaining its equivalency.

An institution entering into consortial arrangements or contractual agreements for the delivery of courses/programs or services offered by distance or correspondence education is an active participant in ensuring the effectiveness and quality of the courses and programs offered by all of the participants.

Faculty

An institution offering distance or correspondence learning courses/programs ensures that there is a sufficient number of faculty qualified to develop, design, and teach the courses/programs.

The institution has clear criteria for the evaluation of faculty teaching distance education courses and programs.

Faculty who teach in distance and correspondence education programs and courses receive appropriate training.

Institutional Effectiveness

Comparability of distance education and correspondence programs to campus-based programs and courses is ensured by the evaluation of educational effectiveness, including assessments of student learning outcomes, student retention, and student satisfaction.

The institution regularly assesses the effectiveness of its provision of library/learning resources and student support services for distance education and correspondence students.

Library and Learning Resources

Students have access to and can effectively use appropriate library resources.

Students and faculty have access to laboratories, facilities, and equipment appropriate to the courses or programs.

Student Services

Students have adequate access to the range of services appropriate to support the programs and courses offered through distance and correspondence education.

Students in distance education programs or correspondence courses have an adequate procedure for resolving their complaints, and the institution follows its policies and procedures.

Advertising, recruiting, and admissions information adequately and accurately represent the programs, requirements, and services available to students.

Documented procedures assure that security of personal information is protected in the conduct of assessments and evaluations and in the dissemination of results.

Students enrolled in distance education courses are able to use the technology employed, have the equipment necessary to succeed, and are provided assistance in using the technology.

Facilities and Finances

Appropriate equipment and technical expertise required for distance and correspondence education are available.

The institution, in making distance and correspondence education courses/programs a part of its mission, provides adequate funding for faculty, staff, services, and technological infrastructure to support the methodology.

Document History

Adopted: Commission on Colleges, June 1997
Updated in accord with the revised Principles, December 2006

Revised: SACSCOC Board of Trustees, June 2010
Edited: January 2012
Reformatted: July 2014; August 2018
Revised and Edited: SACSCOC Board of Trustees, September 2020
Edited: February 2022