Policy on the Review of Degree and Certificate Programs Offered via Distance Education

The last several decades have seen the emergence and increased use of technology for instruction by member colleges and universities. While technology has had an impact in a number of areas, of particular interest to the Commission has been the establishment of online education programs offered to students at a distance. These initiatives have enhanced the capacity of many institutions to meet the needs of more students and to provide a wider range of educational opportunities to their traditional student populations.

This policy statement has been developed to assist institutions as they develop distance programs and seek to improve the quality of their distance education activities and to provide a basis for the Commission’s review of distance education programming, in keeping with the policy on substantive change.

The policy is applicable to affiliated institutions which offer (1) Title IV-eligible certificate or degree programs for which students may earn 50% or more of the credits through experiences offered exclusively on-line and/or (2) degree completion programs offered on-line. It is not applicable to on-line courses offered outside the context of a predominantly on-line degree program, nor technologically mediated instruction provided to campus-based students.

Commission Review
Distance education programming, which meets the above definition and is undertaken by an institution for the first time is not automatically included within the institution’s accreditation; it represents a substantive change (see the Commission’s Policy on Substantive Change). The following procedures must be completed before such activities are included within the scope of the institution’s accreditation by the New England Commission of Higher Education.

Notice to the Commission
It is the responsibility of an institution to notify the Commission about its intention to inaugurate distance education programming encompassed by this policy prior to the program being initiated and to provide a substantive change proposal about its plans for the projected programming. The proposal should demonstrate that these activities fulfill the Standards for Accreditation and relevant Commission policies, including (if applicable) the Policy on Contractual Arrangements Involving Courses and Programs. For assistance in developing its proposal, the institution should follow the directions in “Guidelines for Preparing Substantive Change Reports on the Establishment of Academic...”
Programming Offered Through Distance Education.” Institutions should also consult the C-RAC Guidelines for the Review of Distance Education (On-line Learning).

Review Processes
The institution’s substantive change proposal will be reviewed by the Commission at its next regularly scheduled meeting following the proposal’s receipt, provided it is received by the published deadline. The range of possible actions includes approval of the report and inclusion of the programming in the institution’s accreditation and specification of future monitoring if necessary; conferral of general approval to offer distance education programming within the scope of the institution’s mission; deferral of action; and rejection of the proposal. The institution will be notified of the action taken shortly after the Commission meets.

Ongoing Monitoring
As a part of the interim (fifth-year) report required of all colleges and universities on a ten-year evaluation cycle, the institution is expected to apprise the Commission of any significant developments regarding its distance education programming as outlined in the relevant procedural document on interim reports.

Distance education programming will be specifically reviewed through the comprehensive evaluation. The institution is expected to appropriately address such matters in its self-study report.

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