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: (1) assist institutions as they develop distance education courses and programs and seek to improve the quality of their distance education activities; and (2) to provide a basis for the Commission’s review of distance education programming, in keeping with the Policy on Substantive Change.

Definition of Distance Education

Consistent with federal regulations, the Commission defines distance education as education that uses one or more of the following technologies to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor(s) and to support regular and substantive interaction between students and the instructor(s), either synchronously or asynchronously:

(a) the internet;
(b) one-way and two-way transmissions through open broadcast, closed circuit, cable, microwave, broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite, or wireless communications devices;
(c) audio conference;
(d) other media used in a course in conjunction with any of the above technologies.

A program using any of the technologies listed above for any portion of the program is considered a distance education program.

“Regular and substantive” interaction between instructor(s) and students is defined as engaging students in teaching, learning, and assessment that is consistent with the content of the course or competency under discussion and that includes at least two of the following:

(a) providing direct instruction;
(b) assessing or providing feedback on a student’s coursework;
(c) providing information or responding to questions about content; (d) facilitating a group discussion regarding the content of the course or competency.

Institutions are expected to ensure regular and substantive interaction by providing opportunities for such interaction on a predictable and scheduled basis and by monitoring students’ academic engagement and success and ensuring that instructors engage promptly and proactively in substantive interaction when needed on the basis of such monitoring or upon request by the student.

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

Substantive Change
The first time an institution offers a Title IV-eligible certificate or degree program for which 50% or more of the credits may be earned via any of the technologies listed above, it must submit a substantive change proposal to the Commission. The proposal must be approved by the Commission before the program(s) can be included within the scope of the institution’s accreditation by the New England Commission of Higher Education. 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 21st Century Distance Education Guidelines. (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.

March 1, 2001
November 2003
July 2009
July 2020
June 2021