Distance Education & Correspondence Education Manual

August 2009

Table of Contents

Introduction and Definitions

Distance education and correspondence education are common delivery mechanisms in American higher education. A sizable proportion of institutions that are campus-based offer some portion of the curriculum and programs in a distance education format and there are a relatively small but growing number of institutions that offer educational services solely through distance education. In 2006, the Higher Education Act revised regulations that had restricted the use of distance education by institutions eligible for Title IV financial aid. Effective July 1 of that year, institutions were no longer restricted to offering less than fifty percent of a degree program via distance education in order to regain eligibility. The regulatory changes are likely to increase the number of programs campus-based institutions offer through distance education media as well as generate opportunity for some new, solely distance education based institutions to emerge in the WASC region.

The Higher Education Opportunities Act of 2009 provides greater emphasis on Distance Education and Correspondence Education and defines each:

Definition of Distance Education

> *"Distance education is defined, for the purpose of accreditation review as a formal interaction which uses one or more technologies to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and which supports regular and substantive interaction between the students and instructor, either synchronously or asynchronously. Distance education often incorporates technologies such as 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 video cassettes, DVDs, and CD-ROMs, in conjunction with any of the other technologies.*

Definition of Correspondence Education

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) That are typically self-paced; and,

(4) Correspondence education is not distance education.

A Correspondence course is:

(1) A course provided 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. Interaction between the instructor and student is limited, is not regular and substantive, and is primarily initiated by the student. Correspondence courses are typically self-paced;

(2) A course which is part correspondence and part residential training, the Secretary considers the course to be a correspondence course; and,

(3) Not distance education."[1]

The Commission recognizes and embraces distance education as a convenient, flexible, and effective means of providing quality education. Many working students with multiple demands on their time find that distance education meets their needs better than campus-based education.

Many campus-based students are now taking at least part of their educational programming through distance education classes. For some institutions, the pedagogical strategies successfully used in distance education classes with distant students (for example, on line chat rooms and electronic voting or feedback) have been incorporated into routine programs and services offered in classrooms on campus or provided for students who are physically on campus and don't necessarily need to use technology to connect with the campus.

The purpose of this Distance Education and Correspondence Education Manual is to provide some guidelines to (1) team evaluators as well as (2) ACCJC member institutions as they plan, implement, or expand distance education and/or correspondence education programs or evaluate distance learning programs.

The ACCJC is obliged by its mission – to assure institutional quality – to carefully review the quality of distance education programs and services during its comprehensive evaluation visits, its follow-up visits, and during substantive change reviews.

Some Current Accreditation Concerns

Distance education and correspondence education, whether new or an expansion of efforts should consider the following. Teams evaluating institutions against the Standards should review these as well.

Mission, Educational Programs, and Curriculum

Distance education should remain consistent with and central to the stated mission of the

---

[1] Language is from the Federal Register 8/6/2009

institution. The educational policies of the institution regarding distance education programs should be clearly stated, and the distance education curriculum should demonstrate appropriate rigor comparable to courses offered in the traditional face-to-face format. If course materials are developed outside the institution, the academic quality of those materials should be assessed via the institution's review policies. Academic standards for all courses and programs should be the same as for all other educational experiences delivered by the institution. Commission Standards apply equally to distance education, correspondence education, and traditional instructional formats.

Faculty

Some faculty members will be more interested in distance education than others, and most faculty who engage it will require ongoing training. Because technological currency is important, the level of support for staff development is one indicator of institutional commitment to distance education. Faculty access to appropriate technology and software as well as to support personnel is critical to a successful program. On-going evaluation of faculty involved in distance education should include appropriate recognition of all scholarly activities and be consistent with faculty evaluation in face-to-face instruction.

Students

The overriding concern for students is that the delivery of instruction be in modes appropriate for the specific content of a course. Students should expect that distance education programs will permit completion of learning outcomes and objectives in the same manner as those delivered in traditional programs. Student access to faculty should also be a major program ingredient. Issues about the evaluation of student work, including assurances that the student who registers in a distance education course or program is the same student who participates in and completes the program and receives the academic credit, must be implemented.

> The institution must also publish for its students its policies to the effect that, in achieving these outcomes, it ensures the protection of student privacy and will notify students at the time of class registration of any charges associated with verification of student identity.

The academic and technical skills (as well as the commitment) required to successfully complete such a program should be made clear to students, and since a distance education environment requires certain skills and competencies to succeed, the institution should have the means to assess whether students have them. Proper training should be available for students working independently and utilizing the necessary technology. Access to student services such as admissions, orientation, financial aid, registration, advisement, tutoring, and other appropriate student services and technical support should be made available comparable to on-campus instructional programs.

Library and Learning Resources

Availability and use of appropriate, equivalent, (and sometimes personalized) learning resources are essentials of a supportive and successful distance education program. Although many of today's institutional libraries are technologically capable of supporting learners at a distance, orientation and training are important components of effective student use of all resources for learning.

Institutional Effectiveness and Student Outcomes

Although the Commission does not endorse a specific assessment model, providing evidence of institutional effectiveness will require that the institution apply learning outcome and assessment strategies to all distance education courses. Such strategies should take into account how distance education and correspondence education programs compare with more traditional programs in such areas as student achievement, transferability, observable and measurable learning outcomes, eligibility for financial aid, student satisfaction, and other program goals. Review and approval processes should be in place and used to ensure appropriateness of goals and objectives, as well as the effectiveness of distance education.

Organization, Planning, Human Resources

The college community must understand the connection between the distance education program and the institution's mission and share the reasons for the program's development. The college should demonstrate commitment to financial and technical support that allows a program to continue for a period of time sufficient for students to complete educational objectives. Integrated planning for the fiscal, technical, and human resources needed to deliver such a program must be thorough and continuous and provide for evaluation on an on-going basis and lead to improvement. Evaluation should focus on the relevance, effectiveness, and efficiency of the institution's distance education program, as well as on assessment of student learning, retention, and satisfaction.

Facilities and Equipment

In integrating a distance education program into the institution's mission, planning for technology-enhanced facilities and equipment appropriate to meeting program or course objectives must be part of long-range integrated planning and budgeting activities.

Catalogs and Publications

As an official document of the institution, the catalog should clearly describe the distance education program. Complete, timely, and accurate description of instructional delivery could also be presented in the catalog or in supplemental publications. If prerequisites for participation or other program requirements exist, these should be clearly stated, as should expected learning outcomes and the nature of the faculty/student interaction. Transferability of credit should be addressed in a forthright manner, as should matters regarding fees.

Intellectual Property Rights

The preparation of distance education instructional materials differs from the preparation of materials for the traditional classroom setting, raising questions about ownership, copyright, and fair use. Faculty and administrative personnel will need to develop policies that do not undermine faculty rights or the learning/teaching process and that address issues of copyright, ownership, and faculty compensation.

ACCJC Policies

There are two policies of the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges that are specific to distance education and correspondence education and which should be considered when developing distance education or correspondence education programs as well as in evaluating their effectiveness. These are: (1) the Substantive Change Policy and (2) the Policy on Distance Education and on Correspondence Education.

The development of distance education programs may represent a substantive change—a change which alters the objectives or the scope of the institution, modifies the nature of the constituencies it seeks to serve, or changes the geographic area served. Such changes are subject to Commission review and require that the institution notify the Commission in advance of program initiation by filing a Substantive Change Proposal.

The Substantive Change Policy describes the intent, processes, and procedures for substantive change. It can be found in the Accreditation Reference Handbook available on the Commission's web site: www.accjc.org.

The ACCJC Substantive Change Manual is also a useful resource for colleges offering 50% or more of a program, certificate, or degree through a mode of distance education or correspondence education. It is available on the Commission's web site.

ACCREDITING COMMISSION FOR COMMUNITY AND JUNIOR COLLEGES
Western Association of Schools and Colleges

Policy on Distance Education and on Correspondence Education

(Adopted June 2001, Edited August 2004, Revised June 2005, Revised January 2010)

Background

Recognizing that most institutions must make use of the growing range of systems for delivery of instruction, including various electronic means, the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) has adopted a policy based on principles of good practice to help ensure that distance learning is characterized by the same concerns for quality, integrity, and effectiveness that apply to more traditional modes of instruction.

As methods used to facilitate/conduct distance learning evolve, the ACCJC policies that address distance learning also change. This policy statement has drawn from several previous policies and is intended to replace those policies with a single, unified, and up-to-date statement. Further development of this policy may well be appropriate in the not-so-distant future.

Definition of Distance Education

"Distance education is defined, for the purpose of accreditation review as a formal interaction which uses one or more technologies to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and which supports regular and substantive interaction between the students and instructor, either synchronously or asynchronously. Distance education often incorporates technologies such as 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 video cassettes, DVDs, and CD-ROMs, in conjunction with any of the other technologies.

Definition of Correspondence Education

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;

6

(3) That are typically self-paced; and,

(4) Correspondence education is not distance education.

A Correspondence course is:

 (1) A course provided 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. Interaction between the instructor and student is limited, is not regular and substantive, and is primarily initiated by the student. Correspondence courses are typically self-paced;

(2) A course which is part correspondence and part residential training, the Secretary considers the course to be a correspondence course; and,

(3) Not distance education."[2]

Policy

ACCJC policy specifies that all learning opportunities provided by our accredited institutions have the same quality, accountability, and focus on student outcomes, whether they are delivered electronically or by more traditional means. The intent of the policy is to provide 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 electronically 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.

---

[2] Language is from the Federal Register 8/6/2009

- Institutions are expected to provide the resources and structure needed to accomplish these outcomes.

- Institutions are expected to demonstrate that their students achieve these outcomes through application of rigorous assessment.

- Institutions are expected to provide the ACCJC reasons to believe that these outcomes will continue to be accomplished.

- Institutions are expected to provide the ACCJC 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 ACCJC advance notice of intent to offer a program in which 50% or more of the courses are via distance education or correspondence education, through the Substantive Change process.

- Institutions which offer distance education or correspondence education 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 credit. 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, and/or new or other technologies and/or practices that are developed and effective in verifying each student's identification. The institution must also publish to their students, 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.