



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

## **GUIDELINES FOR ADDRESSING DISTANCE EDUCATION AND CORRESPONDENCE COURSES**

### **A Guide for Evaluators Charged with Reviewing Distance Education and Correspondence Courses**

This Guide provides assistance for committee members when preparing to serve as evaluators of distance education and correspondence courses. It should be used in conjunction with the *Principles of Accreditation*, the *Resource Manual*, and the *Handbook for Review Committees* as well as SACSCOC policy [Distance and Correspondence Education](#). It is divided into four sections:

1. An Overview of SACSCOC Expectations
2. SACSCOC Definitions, Standards, and Policies
3. Distance and Correspondence Program Review Activities
  - The design of the review
  - Key persons to be interviewed
  - Generic questions related to distance and correspondence education programs being reviewed
  - Expectations and questions related to standards and requirements of the *Principles*
4. The Application of Findings

#### **An Overview of Expectations**

Accreditation is a higher education self-regulatory mechanism that plays a significant role in fostering public confidence in the educational enterprise and student learning, in maintaining minimum standards, and in enhancing institutional effectiveness. It also serves as a means by which institutions recognize and accept one another.

Accreditation's review process involves making collective professional judgments. The committee's responsibility is to provide an objective professional judgment to SACSCOC's Board of Trustees and to the institution as to (1) the institution's status of compliance with the *Principles*

of Accreditation and (2) the quality and acceptability of the institution's Quality Enhancement Plan (applicable to reaffirmations). The committee also provides advice on other areas of educational improvement.

The role of the evaluator is to examine the institution's mission, policies, procedures, programs, resources, and activities that relate to one or more sections or subsections of the *Principles* and then bring to the full committee the findings and any proposed recommendations and comments. To do that, the evaluator will carefully review the institutional documents; interview faculty, staff, and students; and gather information that will enable the evaluator to provide an accurate assessment of the institution.

A committee member is responsible for the following:

- Preparing extensively for the visit/review by studying all training materials, reviewing the institution's documents and materials, studying the *Principles*, and becoming familiar with the specific assignment to review distance and correspondence learning.
- Participating in all scheduled or special meetings of the committee, including those arranged before the actual review period/visit
- Applying the standards to the institution's distance and correspondence education programs and services, as well as providing input regarding the application of the other standards.
- Coordinating input from other committee members assigned to review various aspects of distance and correspondence education.
- Contributing to the committee's collective decisions.
- Developing and writing, or revising and updating, assigned sections of the committee report.

### **Commission Definitions, Standards, and Policies**

The Core Requirements and Standards of the *Principles of Accreditation* apply to all modes of delivery, including distance and correspondence education. Institutions are responsible for the quality of programs and courses delivered by means of distance education and for ensuring that distance and correspondence education programs and courses offered are complemented by support structures and resources that allow for the total growth and development of students.

SACSCOC expects institutions not only to meet the *Principles* as applied to distance learning, but also to comply with all related SACSCOC policies. Outlined below is the definition for distance and correspondence education and a summary of standards and policy statements related to distance and correspondence education.

**Definition of Distance Education.** For the purposes of the 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 video cassettes, DVD's, and CD-ROMs if used as part of the distance learning course or program.

**Definition of Correspondence Education.** Correspondence education is 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**

- At the time of review by SACSCOC, the institution must demonstrate 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 pass code, (2) proctored examinations, and (3) new or other technologies and practices that are effective in verifying student identification. (*Note:* This applies to courses in which the majority of instruction occurs when students and instructor are not in the same place.) (See also Standard 10.6 of the *Principles of Accreditation*.)
- The institution must have a written procedure for protecting the privacy of students enrolled in distance and correspondence education courses or programs. (See also Standard 10.6 of the *Principles of Accreditation*.)
- The institution must have 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. (*Note:* The publication of fees may also be incorporated into official student documents or institution's web page that list academic/activities fees for students.) (See also Standard 10.6 of the *Principles of Accreditation*.)
- An institution that offers distance or correspondence education must ensure that it reports accurate headcount enrollment on its annual Institutional Profile submitted to SACSCOC.
- 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.

## Distance and Correspondence Program Review Activities

The design of the review is dependent on a number of factors, some of which include:

1. ***Accountability for the delivery and quality of programs.*** Consider whether the accountability for the quality of distance learning courses and programs is centralized or decentralized. Is there one office that coordinates the development and quality of distance learning courses/programs or is the accountability decentralized by academic departments or schools? By another means?
2. ***Scope of the programs.*** Consider the geographical scope of courses and programs offered through distance and correspondence education. Review design might include (1) the review of one site of a similar group of distance learning activities and (2) the review of multiple sites of distance learning activities geographically remote from the main campus (by direct visit, interaction by electronic conferencing, telephone, questionnaire distributed in advance of visit, etc.)
3. ***The extent of course work/programs.*** Consider the number and variety of courses/programs involved where the majority of instruction occurs when students and instructors are not in the same place.
4. ***Modes of delivery.*** Consider the various modes of instruction offered through technology and student access to those delivery modes.
5. ***Access to information regarding the programs.*** Consider all information provided by the institution in advance of the review and determine additional information needed to successfully inform evaluators of the courses/programs.

### Key Persons to be Interviewed

The distance learning evaluator should review carefully the organizational chart of the institution and study the administrative structure created for the accountability of distance learning activities. Who is accountable for distance learning activities? Although the persons to be evaluated depend on the structure, size, and scope of distance learning activities, the people who should be considered for interviews are:

- Students currently in the programs
- Students who have completed one or more distance learning courses
- Main campus deans and directors responsible for distance learning activities, including those responsible for evaluating student learning
- Main campus faculty and student support and librarians/learning resource personnel involved in the distance learning activities
- Off-site deans, directors, coordinators, faculty, librarians and administrators
- Operational people, such as academic and student services (even though they are neither the driving force behind the programs nor the persons accountable for the quality of programs)

## **Generic Questions Related to the Distance and Correspondence Education Programs being Reviewed**

Before beginning the review, the evaluator should have received information from the institution that addresses the following questions:

- What distance and correspondence learning courses and programs are being offered?
- What are the modes of delivery for the programs? The description should include hybrids of online/face-to-face, etc.
- Where are they offered?
- Why did the institution choose to offer these programs through a distance learning mode?
- Who are responsible for the academic and administrative coordination of the programs?
- Who are “teaching” the courses? Are the faculty of record the same faculty employed by the institution to provide the instruction?

If the evaluator is unclear as to the answers to the above questions, then he/she should contact the committee chair so that sufficient background is provided in order for evaluators to begin their reviews.

## **Expectations and Questions related to the standards and requirements of the *Principles***

SACSCOC bases its accreditation of degree-granting higher education institutions on requirements outlined in the *Principles of Accreditation*. These requirements apply to all institutional programs and services, wherever located or however delivered. This includes programs offered through distance and correspondence education. Consequently, member and candidate institutions completing a compliance certification or receiving a committee visit and applicant institutions completing an application for membership should – at a minimum – address the following areas.

### Mission

Expectation:

- If an institution offers significant distance and correspondence education, it should be reflected appropriately in the institution’s mission.

Questions:

- Is there evidence that the governing board has been involved in the decision to include distance education courses or programs as a part of the institution’s mission?
- Are distance learning programs part of the mission statement of the institution? How does the mission of distance learning “fit” the overall mission of the institution?
- Is there evidence of understanding on the part of the governing board, the administration, and the faculty concerning how extensive distance education should become?

### Organizational Structure

Expectation:

- Administrative responsibility for all educational programs, including the offering of distance education courses and programs, should be reflected in the organizational structure of the institution.

Questions:

- What is the administrative structure responsible for the quality of distance learning programs? Does the institution maintain control over distance education programs?
- Does the organizational chart for the institution indicate responsibility for distance education?
- Does the organizational structure at the institution reflect the relationship between courses/programs offered in traditional formats and courses/programs offered by distance education?

### Institutional Effectiveness

Expectations:

- Comparability of distance and correspondence education programs and courses to face-to-face programs and courses is ensured by the evaluation of educational effectiveness, including assessments of student learning outcomes and student success.
- The institution regularly assesses the effectiveness of its provision of library/learning resources and student support services for distance or correspondence education students.

Questions:

- How do distance learning programs fit into the overall plans of the institution?
- Who directs the development, planning, and evaluation of distance learning programs? To what extent are faculty members involved?
- Has the institution implemented a plan for the collection of data relating to its distance learning programs? Is the collected data used in the planning and evaluation process? Are the research activities for collecting data regularly evaluated?
- Is there evidence that the effectiveness of the distance education program is regularly assessed and steps taken for improvement of the program? Is the evaluation plan part of a broader institutional plan?
- Has the institution developed student learning outcomes for the courses/programs offered by distance education? How are these student learning outcomes assessed? How is this assessment incorporated into the institution's institutional effectiveness process?
- Have student success metrics been identified for students enrolled in distance education programs? How are they assessed and analyzed?

### Curriculum and Instruction

Expectations:

- The faculty assumes primary responsibility for and exercises oversight of distance and correspondence education, 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, telecourses, 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 education.
- For all degree programs offered through distance or correspondence education, the programs embody a coherent course of study that supports the institution's mission and is based upon fields of study appropriate to higher education.
- For all courses offered through distance or correspondence education, 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 academic arrangements 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/programs offered by all of the participants. Such arrangements are subject to periodic review.
- The institution's curriculum designed for distance learning is directly related and appropriate to the mission of the institution.
- The institution makes available to students current academic calendars, grading practices, and refund policies.

#### Questions:

- How appropriate are the delivery systems for the programs being offered?
- Are admissions, degree completion, curriculum, and instructional design policies and procedures the same as those used for traditional campus-based programs?
- Does the institution contract for the delivery of instruction of any or all of its distance learning program with an outside party? Do the contracts provide for quality control by the institution awarding credit for the distance learning course or program? Are provisions of the agreement, contract, or arrangement clearly delineated? Is there provision for regular evaluation of the effectiveness of the arrangement?
- Are goals and objectives, and skills and competencies for distance learning programs comparable to those expected for traditional campus-based programs?
- Does the administrative structure for provision of distance education courses/programs appropriately involve faculty as well as administrators? What role do the academic departments play in the design and coordination of courses?
- Are faculty members in distance learning programs also involved in curriculum development, in coordinating syllabi, and in preparing comprehensive examinations?
- Is there appropriate technological assistance for faculty charged with developing distance education courses/programs?
- If "outside experts" develop and provide distance education courses/programs, what is the

role of the institution's faculty?

- Are the technological delivery modes, instructional design, and resource materials appropriate for the courses and programs? Does the technology used enhance student learning?
- Does the institution provide adequate technology for its distance education courses and does it upgrade the technology as needed?
- Does the institution make training in technology available to faculty members teaching distance education courses?
- Is assistance in use of required technology provided to distance education students who need it?

## Faculty

Expectations:

- 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.

Questions:

- What role is expected of faculty members relative to distance education courses/programs?
- Are there policies concerning the expectations of full and part time faculty planning for, designing, and teaching distance education courses? What is the percentage of full-time/part-time faculty who are involved in courses/programs designated as distance and correspondence education?
- Is there evidence that consideration is given to the demands of teaching distance learning courses and do faculty loads reflect this consideration?
- What procedures are in place to ensure communication between faculty and students?
- What are the defined qualifications for faculty members teaching distance education courses? How does the institution ensure that faculty are qualified to teach those courses?
- Is there evidence that the institution has considered the differences between teaching distance education courses and teaching courses offered using "traditional" methodologies?
- Does the institution regularly evaluate the effectiveness of faculty members who teach distance education courses? Are the criteria clear for evaluating distance education faculty?
- How does the institution orient and train faculty for teaching in these programs?
- Does the institution make professional development activities and training available to distance education faculty members and ensure that distance education faculty members engage in that training and professional development?
- Is there evaluation of faculty members teaching distance education courses? Is there a clear understanding among distance education faculty members concerning expectations and criteria for evaluation? Does the institution publish its criteria for evaluation of and



expectations concerning the teaching of distance education courses? Is there evidence in faculty files of evaluation of distance education faculty members using established and published criteria?

- What is the interaction that occurs between students and faculty in these programs and how is the quality of interaction perceived by faculty and students?

### Library\Learning Resources

Expectations:

- Students have access to and can effectively use appropriate library and learning resources supporting distance learning activities.
- Access is provided to laboratories, facilities, and equipment appropriate to the courses or programs

Questions:

- What arrangements has the institution made for ensuring that students have access to appropriate learning resources? Are the resources adequate to support the programs?
- What learning resources are available to distance education students?
- How are distance education students made aware of the available learning resources?
- Do distance education students have access to professional assistance at times when they are likely to need assistance?
- How does the institution know that its provision of resources and assistance to distance learning students is adequate?
- Does the institution make available to distance education students information concerning what will be needed to access learning resources for their enrolled distance education courses?
- Does the institution provide regularly scheduled orientation sessions for distance education students?
- Is data available indicating that provision of learning resources to distance education is effective and that it is regularly evaluated and improved where appropriate?

### Student Support Services

Expectations:

- Students have adequate access to the range of services appropriate to support the programs offered through distance and correspondence education.
- Students in distance or correspondence programs 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 employed.

Questions:

- Has the institution made appropriate and necessary adjustments to ensure adequate student development services for students involved in distance learning programs? Is there a supervisor responsible for ensuring such services?
- Does the institution have a sufficient number of trained student service personnel to ensure provision of appropriate support in such areas as admissions or counseling?
- Does the institution have a sufficient number of trained academic support personnel to ensure provision of academic assistance needed by distance education students?
- Does the institution ensure that services are available?
- Does the institution provide distance education students with material indicating student services and academic services which are available to them and how to access the services?
- How does the institution identify distance education students who need academic assistance and how does it intervene to provide that assistance?
- Is there data that demonstrates achievement by distance education students of learning outcomes established by the institution?

Facilities and Finances

Expectations:

- The institution provides appropriate facilities, equipment, and technical expertise required for distance and correspondence education.
- 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.

Questions:

- Does the budget reflect provision of funding for needs of distance education at the institution to include technology, faculty, staff, administrative personnel, learning resources, and services? Are the funding needs reflected in the annual budget and in long-range budgetary projections for the institution?
- Are the technological resources, means of delivery, and other physical resources available, maintained, staffed, and current?
- Are there sufficient financial resources available and committed to support distance learning activities and how is it supported by the budget?
- Is there a financial plan for maintaining the support systems needed for the programs, including upgrading systems currently being used and maintaining currency of technological delivery?
- What arrangements has the institution made for required laboratories, workshops, etc. associated with distance learning programs?

**The Application of Findings**

Following the review of distance and correspondence learning courses and programs, the evaluator, in concert with the other committee members, determines whether the institution meets

the standards and the policies of the Commission.

***For a reaffirmation of accreditation review or initial accreditation review***

If an institution fails to assess its distance and correspondence education in its Compliance Certification when it indicates on its Institutional Summary Form that it offers the courses/programs, then the Off-Site Reaffirmation Committee (Accreditation Committee for applicant institutions) will find the institution noncompliant with Standard 14.3 (*Comprehensive institutional review*).

If an institution partially assesses its distance and correspondence education in its Compliance Certification; that is, evaluates its quality in the application of some standards and not others that are relevant, then the Off-Site Reaffirmation Committee (Accreditation Committee for applicant institutions) will find the institution to be out of compliance with the specific standard(s) not addressed but relevant to distance learning activities. This would be done in lieu of citing Standard 14.3.

***For a substantive change review with a focus on distance and correspondence education***

In the review of its distance and correspondence education courses/programs, the institution will complete a documentation template addressing standards specifically designed for assessing distance learning activities. Therefore, Substantive Change Committees will cite the institution for the standards listed on the template for which it finds the institution to be out of compliance.

***For the fifth-year interim review***

If an institution fails to assess its distance and correspondence education in its Fifth-Year Compliance Certification when it indicates on its Institutional Summary Form that it offers the courses/programs, then the Fifth-Year Interim Committee will request a Referral Report in which the institution must document compliance with Standard 14.3 (*Comprehensive institutional review*).

If an institution partially assesses its distance and correspondence education; that is, evaluates its quality in the application of some standards and not others that are relevant, then the Fifth-Year Interim Committee will request a Referral Report in which the institution must document compliance with the specific relevant standard(s) not addressed in the Fifth-Year Interim Report Compliance Certification. This would be done in lieu of citing Standard 14.3.

**Document History**

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