



APPROVAL OF DISTANCE AND CORRESPONDENCE EDUCATION

The Higher Learning Commission is adopting new policies regarding Distance Education. The policies outline when an institution needs to notify the Commission about a distance education offering and when it needs to seek approval of that distance education offering. This document provides guidance on when to seek approval for programs with distance education and what documentation is needed to support the request.

Introduction

In previous years the Commission tracked and approved distance education only when it was 100 percent asynchronous online. Beginning in June 2010 the Commission will adopt a different approach to approval of distance education. Institutions will have an obligation to report their distance and correspondence education programs to the Commission as well as to seek approval of those programs where approval is required by Commission policy. This document provides definitions of distance and correspondence education as well as revised protocols for approval. While this policy will not take effect until June 2010, the Commission is beginning to collect this information through the Annual Institutional Data Update (AIDU) in preparation for implementation.

Definitions

The Commission will change its definitions for distance and correspondence education to match the federal definitions. In the past, the Commission used the federal definitions only for Verification of Student Identity. However, the federal definitions will now apply to substantive change and all other uses of these terms in Commission policies and publications. The definitions are as follows:

Distance education means education that uses one or more of the {following} technologies (i) to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and (ii) to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor, synchronously or asynchronously. The technologies used may include: (i) the internet; (ii) one way and two way transmissions through open broadcast, closed circuit, cable, microwave, broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite, or wireless communications devices; (iii) audioconferencing; or (iv) videocassettes, DVDs, and CD-Roms, if the videocassettes, DVDs or CD-Roms are used in conjunction with any of the technologies listed in clauses (i) through (iii).

Correspondence education/course 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 not regular and substantive, and is primarily initiated by the student. (3) Correspondence courses are typically self-paced. (4) Correspondence education is not distance education.

Institutional Responsibility for Reporting and Seeking Approval of Distance and Correspondence Education

Institutions have a responsibility to ensure that the Commission is properly informed about and has approved distance and correspondence education.

Notification to the Commission

Institutions have a responsibility to notify the Commission through the AIDU of every educational program, including both degree and Title IV eligible certificate programs, in which the institution offers 50 percent or more of the courses or credits through one of the modalities identified in the definitions. Institutions need to provide the date of initiation, the modality, and the number of students enrolled in each distance or correspondence education program in completing that submission. While institutions may need to estimate student populations the first year, institutions should build appropriate systems that can provide enrollment information in future years.

Approval of Distance or Correspondence Education by the Commission

Every institution must seek approval from the Commission for the **initiation** of distance or correspondence education programs wherein 50 percent or more of the courses or credits are offered through the modalities listed in the definitions. Institutions should consult with their staff liaison regarding any potential exceptions.

Institutions that have received approval to initiate distance or correspondence education will be required to seek approval for the **expansion** of distance or correspondence education. The threshold for the approval of the expansion of distance or correspondence education will be set by the Commission at the time of the initial approval of distance education and may vary among institutions depending on the size of the institution, its resources, and its capacity to initiate distance and correspondence education programs.

Institutions can notify the Commission of distance or correspondence programs through the AIDU. However, institutions cannot seek approval for new or expanded distance or correspondence education programs through the AIDU.

Hybrid Courses

Many institutions offer hybrid courses in which there is a mix of distance and face-to-face instruction. For the purpose of determining whether 50 percent of the courses are distance or correspondence courses, thereby making the program subject to the Commission's policies on distance and correspondence education, an institution should consider that a course through which the **predominance of the instruction** takes place through a non-face-to-face modality is a distance or correspondence course.

Implementation

These requirements will become effective upon the Board's final reading and adoption of the policy in June 2010. An institution that has already received approval for distance or correspondence education in the past will continue to have approval for

those programs but should consult with the Commission staff liaison about whether any planned expansion after June 2010 will necessitate future approvals.

Relevant Proposed Policies (effective June 2010)

3.2 COMMISSION KNOWLEDGE AND APPROVAL OF CHANGE AT AN INSTITUTION

An institution shall have the obligation to report institutional changes to the Commission as identified in this policy and related policies and to seek and receive Commission approval where appropriate prior to implementing specific changes.

3.2(a) INSTITUTIONAL NOTIFICATION AND REPORTING OBLIGATION

An institution shall notify the Commission of certain institutional changes as identified in this policy through the Commission's Change Reporting Report (CRR). Such changes shall be reported to the Commission prior to their initiation, and Commission staff shall notify the institution whether prior notification is sufficient or whether such changes must be formally approved by the Commission as described in Commission policy 3.2(b) (SUBSTANTIVE CHANGES REQUIRING PRIOR COMMISSION APPROVAL) prior to initiation. Changes requiring notification include the following:

- 8. Initiation of any distance or correspondence programs where 50% or more of the courses or credits in the program are offered through distance or correspondence education;**

SUBSTANTIVE CHANGES REQUIRING PRIOR COMMISSION APPROVAL

An institution shall receive Commission approval prior to initiating any of the following changes:

- 7. The initiation or expansion, as defined by the Commission in Commission procedures, of distance or correspondence or other education wherein 50% or more of the courses or credits in one or more academic programs are provided through the alternate delivery;**

Questions

Contact your Commission staff liaison or the Commission's Office of Legal and Governmental Affairs.