



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

## **Distance Education and the *Principles of Accreditation*: Documenting Compliance**

### **Guidelines**

The Core Requirements, Comprehensive Standards, and Federal Requirements of the *Principles of Accreditation* apply to distance education as well as other, more “traditional” methods of delivery. Thus, institutions are responsible for the quality of programs and courses delivered by means of distance education and are responsible for ensuring that distance education programs which they offer are complemented by support structures and resources that allow for the total growth and development of their distance education students.

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 Core Requirements, Comprehensive Standards, and Federal Requirements.

### **Mission and Organizational Structure**

#### ***Core Requirement 2.4***

#### ***Comprehensive Standard 3.1.1***

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| Expectations:             | Provision of distance education courses and programs should be reflected in the institution’s mission and approved by the governing board because of the distinct character of distance education and because of the human, technological, and financial resources required for a high quality distance education program.   |
| Questions/Considerations: | <p>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?</p> <p>Is there evidence of understanding on the part of the governing board, the administration, and the faculty concerning how extensive distance education will or should become?</p> |
| Best Practices:           | <p>Such items as planning documents and board minutes reflect that the institution has given thoughtful consideration to its capacity to offer courses or programs by distance education.</p> <p>Institutional planning documents and mission/purpose statements indicate that the institution has planned the scope of distance education offerings.</p>          |

There is at least a five year technology plan addressing goals for distance education related to enrollment, academic and student services, course development, and faculty support.

***Comprehensive Standard 3.2.7***

- Expectations: 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/Considerations: Does the organizational chart for the institution reflect 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?
- Best Practices: Distance education courses/programs are administered at the institution in such a way as to ensure proper coordination and provision of adequate resources, training for faculty, and support for students.

**Institutional Effectiveness**

***Core Requirement 2.5***

***Comprehensive Standard 3.3.1***

- Expectations: Courses and programs offered by distance education should be included in the planning and evaluation processes at the institution.
- Purpose and outcomes should be identified for the distance education program as a whole.
- Student learning competencies should be identified and achievement assessed for distance education courses and programs.
- Questions/Considerations: Is the distance education program reflected in the institution's strategic (or master) plan?
- Is there evidence that outcomes for the program have been identified?
- Is there evidence that the effectiveness of the distance education program is regularly assessed and steps taken for improvement of the program?
- Has the institution developed student learning competencies for the courses/programs offered by distance education? If these are the same competencies for courses/programs offered by "traditional" methodologies, is assessment identified for distance learning students separate from students taking courses by "traditional" methodologies?

Best Practices: Data is available demonstrating effectiveness of the distance learning program.

Data is available demonstrating achievement of expected competencies by students taking courses/programs by distance education.

The institution demonstrates that it uses data to improve course/program offerings by distance education.

## **Educational Programs**

### ***Comprehensive Standard 3.4.7***

Expectations: Whenever an institution enters into a consortial arrangement or contractual agreement or partnership for delivery of courses or provision of services, it should assume an active role in ensuring the quality of those courses or services. Since many institutions enter into such agreements or arrangements for delivery of courses/programs by distance education, the institution should be an active participant in ensuring the effectiveness and quality of the courses/programs offered by all of the participants.

Questions/Considerations; Are provisions of the agreement, contract, or arrangement clearly delineated?

Is there provision for regular evaluation of the effectiveness of the arrangement?

Best Practices: The institution has input concerning distance education courses/programs offered through contractual, consortial, or other arrangements.

There is evidence that the institution regularly reviews its objectives for arrangements for distance education and evaluates achievement of those objectives.

Contracts or agreements contain provision for administrative and faculty involvement and a measure of "control" by the institution.

### ***Comprehensive Standard 3.4.10***

Expectations: The institution should ensure that faculty have played an appropriate role in designing the courses/programs to be offered by distance education.

Faculty should be engaged in distance education course/program planning and systematic review.

Faculty should play an appropriate role in academic oversight of distance education initiatives.

Questions/Considerations: Does the administrative structure for provision of distance education courses/programs appropriately involve faculty as well as administrators?

Is there appropriate technological assistance for faculty charged with developing distance education courses/programs?

If “outside experts” develop and provide distance education courses/programs, are faculty involved and do they have a sense of ownership?

Best Practices:

There is a logically sequenced course development schedule involving faculty input and ensuring availability of courses as students need them. A schedule of course offerings is available so that students can plan their programs.

There is consistency in course format.

Faculty members develop syllabi for distance education courses which include learning objectives and other information vital to student success in distance education courses.

The structure of distance education courses/programs reflects consideration of time management challenges and the risk of attrition for students taking courses by distance education.

Course design takes into consideration the need for and importance of interaction between faculty and students and among students.

The institution controls the number of students in distance education courses and ensures that faculty teaching those courses have adequate time for interaction, monitoring, and evaluating student progress and success.

A support system exists for faculty teaching distance education courses.

***Comprehensive Standard 3.4.12***

Expectations:

The institution is expected to provide technology adequate to support its distance education courses/programs.

The institution is expected to ensure that faculty members teaching distance education courses are proficient in the use of technology.

The institution is expected to ensure that potential distance education students know what technological expertise they will need and what technology they must possess to successfully complete distance education courses.

Questions/Considerations:

Does the institution provide adequate technology for its distance education courses and does it upgrade the technology as appropriate?

Does the institution make training in technology available to faculty members teaching distance education courses?

Is assistance in use of technology required provided to distance education students who need it?

## Faculty

### ***Core Requirement 2.8***

Expectations:	The institution should employ sufficient full time faculty to support its mission. If the mission includes offering courses/programs by distance education, there should be a sufficient number of faculty qualified to plan for, design, and teach distance education courses.
Questions/Considerations:	What role is expected of faculty members relative to distance education courses/programs?
Best Practices:	<p>There are policies concerning expectations of full and part time faculty planning for, designing, and teaching distance education courses.</p> <p>There is evidence that consideration is given to the demands of teaching distance education courses. Faculty loads reflect this consideration.</p>

### ***Comprehensive Standard 3.7.1***

Expectations:	<p>The institution should consider and define unique qualifications for faculty members teaching distance education courses.</p> <p>The institution is expected to make its case that faculty teaching distance education courses are qualified to teach those courses.</p>
Questions/Considerations:	<p>Is there evidence that the institution has considered differences between teaching distance education courses and teaching courses offered using “traditional” methodologies?</p> <p>Are there policies concerning qualifications of faculty members teaching distance education courses?</p>
Best Practices:	<p>In its practices for hiring faculty members to teach distance education courses, the institution ensures and documents appropriate qualifications.</p> <p>In its practices for preparing current faculty to teach distance education courses, the institution ensures and documents appropriate qualifications.</p>

### ***Comprehensive Standards 3.7.2 and 3.7.3***

Expectations:	<p>The institution should regularly evaluate the effectiveness of faculty members who teach distance education courses.</p> <p>The institution should make clear the criteria by which distance education faculty will be evaluated.</p> <p>The institution should make professional development activities and training available to distance education faculty members and ensure</p>
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that distance education faculty members engage in that training and professional development.

Questions/Considerations:

Is there a clear understanding among distance education faculty members concerning expectations and criteria for evaluation?

Is there evaluation of faculty members teaching distance education courses?

Are professional development/training activities easily accessible to distance education faculty members?

Best Practices:

The institution publishes its criteria for evaluation of and expectations concerning the teaching of distance education courses.

There is evidence in faculty files of evaluation of distance education faculty members using the established and published criteria.

## Learning Resources

***Core Requirement 2.9***

***Comprehensive Standard 3.8.1***

***Comprehensive Standard 3.8.2***

***Comprehensive Standard 3.8.3***

Expectations:

The institution is expected to ensure that all distance education students, regardless of where they are located, have access to library/learning resources adequate to support the courses they are taking.

The institution is expected to provide orientation to distance education students concerning available resources and how to access and use them.

Staff with expertise in assisting distance education students should be available to assist students in accessing and using available learning resources.

The institution is expected to regularly assess the effectiveness of its provision of library/learning resources for distance education students.

Questions/Considerations:

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 receive orientation and training in accessing the library/learning resources made available by the institution?

Do distance education students have access to professional assistance at times when they are likely to need assistance?

Does the institution know that its provision of resources and assistance to distance learning students is adequate?

Best Practices:

The institution makes available to distance education students information concerning what will be needed to access learning resources for the distance education courses they will register for.

The institution determines the abilities and needs of its distance education students in accessing learning resources.

The institution provides regularly scheduled orientation sessions for distance education students.

The institution makes available to distance education students information concerning times and means of accessing professional assistance.

The institution defines expected outcomes for effective provision of learning resources.

Data is 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**

***Core Requirement 2.10***

***Comprehensive Standard 3.4.9***

***Comprehensive Standard 3.9.3***

Expectations:

The institution is expected to consider support services needed by distance education students and provide for those needs.

The institution is expected to provide staff sufficient to meet support needs of distance education students.

The institution is expected to consider academic support needs of its distance education students to include access to advisement, tutorials, and mentoring.

The institution is expected to monitor the success of its distance education students to include consideration of drop out rates, failure rates, and completion rates.

Questions/Considerations:

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 communicate to students how they may access student service support and academic support?

Does the institution ensure that the services are available when it indicates that they are available?

Best Practices:

Distance education students are provided with material indicating student services and academic services which are available to them and how to access the services.

Services are available at reasonable times for access by students.

Outcomes are established for all services provided to distance education students and the institution has data available to show that the services are effective.

The institution has processes by which it can identify distance education students who need academic assistance and intervenes to provide that assistance.

Data exists to demonstrate achievement by distance education students of learning outcomes established by the institution.

#### ***Federal Requirement 4.5***

Expectations:

The institution is expected to provide distance education students with processes by which they can submit complaints.

Questions/Considerations:

Do distance education students know how they may file a complaint and receive feedback on resolution of the complaint?

Best Practices:

A process by which a distance education student may file a complaint and receive response within a reasonable time is provided to the student upon registration.

Documentation exists to indicate that institutions are responsive to student complaints and resolves the complaint within a reasonable time period.

### **Financial Resources**

#### ***Core Requirement 2.11.1***

Expectations:

The institution, in making distance education courses/programs a part of its mission, is expected to provide adequate funding for faculty, staff, services, and technological infrastructure to support the methodology.

Questions/Considerations:

Does the budget reflect provision of funding for needs of distance education at the institution?

Best Practices:

Adequate funding is provided for the distance education program to include technology, faculty, staff, administrative personnel, learning resources, and services.

Funding needs are reflected in the annual budget and in long range budgetary projections for the institution.

## Physical Resources

### ***Core Requirement 2.11.2***

### ***Comprehensive Standard 3.11.3***

Expectations:	The institution is expected to provide adequate technological resources to offer high quality distance education courses/programs.
Questions/Considerations:	What technology does the institution use for its distance education programs?  Is the technology used adequate to provide high quality courses to distance education students?
Best Practices:	Consistent with the distance education courses offered, the technological resources, means of delivery, and other physical resources are available, maintained, staffed, and upgraded on a regular basis.