

NWCCU POLICIES | DISTANCE EDUCATION

Institutions engaged in distance education must adhere to this policy of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), in accordance with the [United States Department of Education's \(USDE\) regulations](#) [34 CFR 600.02] [on Distance Education](#).

Distance education is a means of providing educational programming to students physically separated from the instructor. While the processes used to deliver the education may differ from face-to-face delivery to on-campus students, distance education programs are expected to be of high quality and effective, i.e., regardless of the modality used to deliver educational programs, they must result in positive student outcomes. The institution is required to:

1. Ensure that the institution's faculty have a substantive role in developing the curriculum.
2. Ensure quality of educational programming via program assessment.
3. Demonstrate successful student learning via assessment of student learning outcomes.
4. Monitor student success measures to improve student success.
5. Seek authorization from NWCCU when first establishing a distance education program (first academic program available 50% or more via distance education).
6. Notify NWCCU when 50% or more of additional academic programs are to be offered via distance education.

Definition

The USDE defines Distance Education [[34 CFR 600.02] as follows]:

[Distance education](#):

Education that uses one or more of the technologies listed in paragraphs (2)(i) through (iv) of this definition to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor or instructors and to support *regular and substantive interaction* (see USDE definition) between the students and the instructor or instructors, either synchronously or asynchronously.

The technologies that may be used to offer distance education include:

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 conference; or

Other media used in a course in conjunction with any of the technologies listed above.

Evaluation Of Distance Education

NWCCU's [Standards for Accreditation](#) require that an institution's distance education programming be reviewed as part of its comprehensive accreditation evaluation process. Evaluators who visit an institution that offers distance education must review the "*21st Century Distance Education Guidelines*" provided in the [NC-SARA Policy Manual](#).

Evaluators are asked to verify the following:

Items 1 through 5 follow Federal requirements, including identity, privacy, costs, interactions, and evaluation, which institutions must demonstrate and/or ensure:

1. The institution has in place effective procedures to ensure that the student who registers in a distance education course or program is the same student who participates in and completes the course or program and receives the academic credit.
2. The institution makes clear in writing that these processes protect student privacy.
3. The institution notifies students at the time of registration and enrollment of any additional student charges associated with the verification procedures.
4. The institution has established appropriate academic policies and procedures for its instructors to implement the *requirements for regular and substantive interaction* (see [definitions](#) below) in all courses/programs delivered via distance education.
5. The institution has established a system for monitoring or periodically evaluating its online programs to ensure that its instructors continue to observe such policies for *regular and substantive interaction*.

Items 6 through 24 follow NC-SARA 21st Century Distance Education Guidelines, which institutions may incorporate to enhance the quality and effectiveness of distance education programs:

Institutional Capacity

6. The institution offering distance learning programs regularly evaluates and demonstrates its capacity along multiple dimensions, including financial resources, technology infrastructure, data security, content expertise, instructional design, support for students and assessment of, and access to information resources. [NC-SARA: 1]
7. Financial support for distance learning is sufficient given the scope of programming, enrollment, student body, methods of delivery, and support. [NC-SARA: 2]
8. The institution supports diversity, equity, and inclusion through its learning environments and student support as appropriate to its mission and student body. [NC-SARA: 3]
9. Educational quality is supported through continuing investment in technology and professional development for faculty as well as other academic, technical, and student support staff. Professional development is ongoing and includes attention to technology, instructional design, learning science, pedagogy, assessment, and methods of using data for improvement. [NC-SARA: 4]
10. The institution ensures that learning resources used for instruction and tools used for access to services are sufficiently supported and ensure accessibility and privacy for students. The institution provides clear policies regarding intellectual property. [NC-SARA: 5]
11. Relevant information that orients students to their courses—such as syllabus, prerequisites, course delivery structure, class schedule, modes of communication—is provided to students on the institution's learning management platform. Students have ready access to available technical support services. [NC-SARA: 6]
12. Online program management (OPM) and other contractual and consortial arrangements (see NWCCU [Policy on Contracts for Education-Related Services](#)) are reviewed to ensure that the institution retains appropriate authority and responsibility for the academic program and student privacy. [NC-SARA: 7]

Academic Programs

13. The academic team includes individuals with expertise in the subject-matter, instructional design, interaction with students, and assessment of student learning. [NC-SARA: 10]
14. The institution collects, analyzes, and uses data on student engagement, achievement, and

- feedback for improvement of the academic program and of student success. [NC-SARA: 11]
15. Institutions that offer the same program in multiple modalities ensure learning outcomes and levels of student achievement are comparable across modalities. [NC-SARA: 12]
 16. Learning activities and assessments are aligned with measurable learning outcomes. Formative and summative assessments of student learning provide feedback to students and serve as a basis for program improvement. [NC-SARA: 13]

Support for Students

17. Academic and support staff who interact with students are able to guide them to the range of support services offered by the institution. [NC-SARA: 14]
18. Continuing support helps students develop as engaged learners, with the information and skills to seek special opportunities to enhance their success. [NC-SARA: 15]
19. Academic and student support services are available remotely, easy to access, and available at times when students need them. [NC-SARA: 16]
20. Collective responsibility for student success is accepted by academic, technical, and student support staff. [NC-SARA: 17]

Program Review

21. Programs offered through distance learning are reviewed on a regular cycle that includes external perspectives. Reviews are informed by empirical evidence including feedback from students and graduates about the academic program and information about graduates' success (e.g., employment and further education). [NC-SARA: 18]
22. The institution documents improvements made as a result of the program reviews and other feedback. [NC-SARA: 19]

Academic and Institutional Integrity

23. Distance learning programs are appropriately integrated into the academic, administrative, and governance systems of the institution. [NC-SARA: 21]
24. Learning outcomes are clear to prospective students and the public. [NC-SARA: 22]

Items 25 through 28 are related to NWCCU Standards

25. The institution's distance education programs are consistent with the mission and educational objectives of the institution.
26. The design and assessment of the distance education programs are overseen by an academic team, including significant involvement of the institution's faculty.
27. Publications and advertising for distance education programs are accurate and contain necessary information such as the program's goals, requirements, academic calendar, and faculty.
28. Contractual relationships and arrangements with consortial partners, if any, are clear and guarantee that the institution maintains direct and sole responsibility for the academic quality of all aspects of distance education programs. Where the institution has entered into contractual relationships involving credits and degrees, it has obtained NWCCU approval for the substantive change.

Adopted April 2021

Based on USDE Definitions of Terms [ref]

Substantive Interaction

Engaging students in teaching, learning, and assessment, consistent with the content under discussion, and also includes at least two of the following:

1. Providing direct instruction
2. Assessing or providing feedback on a student's coursework
3. Providing information or responding to questions about the content of a course or competency
4. Facilitating a group discussion regarding the content of a course or competency
5. Other instructional activities approved by the institution's or program's accrediting agency

Regular Interaction

An institution ensures regular interaction between a student and an instructor or instructors by, prior to the student's completion of a course or competency:

1. Providing the opportunity for substantive interactions with the student on a predictable and scheduled basis commensurate with the length of time and the amount of content in the course or competency.
2. Monitoring the student's academic engagement and success and ensuring that an instructor is responsible for promptly and proactively engaging in substantive interaction with the student when needed on the basis of such monitoring, or upon request by the student.

Requirements for Regular and Substantive Interaction

Regular and substantive interaction between instructor(s) and students requires:

1. The institution's online instruction is delivered through appropriate media.
2. The instructors meet the requirements of the institution's accrediting agency for instruction in the subject matter.
3. Instructors engage in at least two forms of substantive interaction meeting the regulatory requirements for the course or competency (see definition above of *Substantive Interaction*).
4. The institution has established scheduled and predictable opportunities for substantive interaction between students and instructors and created expectations for instructors to monitor each student's engagement and substantively engage with students on the basis of that monitoring.
5. Instructors are responsive to students' requests for instructional support.