Distance Learning Manual

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Introduction

Distance learning is thought by some to be significantly changing American higher education. Today's distance education courses depend on the multitude of constantly changing communication technologies that can transmit instruction and relay materials between learner and teacher.

These technologies have taken shape at a mind-boggling pace, erasing traditional barriers of time, space, and place and represent the capacity to fundamentally change the paradigm for transmitting knowledge and skills from master to learner. For reasons of access, economy, effectiveness, and convenience, distance learning has swept higher education and, in the view of some, changed the role of the academy from a cloistered retreat to a marketplace that some institutions would prefer not to enter. Whether one is a zealot for or against distance learning, one cannot escape its impact.

Nearly half of the college students in this country are of the age group once thought of as nontraditional. They are adults, most of whom work full-time, and they are primarily coming to college for many reasons, including economic advancement, accomplishment of educational degree goals, and personal enrichment. Many of these students are attracted by the convenience and flexibility of distance education programs-a perfect fit for their busy lives. They are not alone, however; the evidence indicates that many students of a more "traditional" age find distance learning attractive and that the population of Americans seeking postsecondary education is growing faster than the nation's ability to meet the demand.

Since the accrediting process serves to validate an institution's commitment to quality assurance and continuous improvement, the purpose of this publication is to provide some assistance to member institutions as they plan and evaluate distance learning programs and since these programs will undergo the same scrutiny employed in the evaluation of conventional campus-based programs, to provide team members with information that aids evaluation. In addition to the policies covered in this manual, users should refer to the Commission's standards as they evaluate distance learning.

Some Current Accreditation Concerns

Motivation

The institution should examine closely its motivation for doing distance education since the driving forces behind this effort are many- the potential for increasing enrollment, public pressure, reducing cost, grant monies, opportunities for faculty to be creative, notions that everybody-is-doing-it, and many

more. Lack of an identified need for distance learning, whether real or perceived, can influence achievement of institutional understanding of the motives for doing distance education. Understanding institutional motives can drive institutional commitment to the program, an essential matter if students are to be ensured the opportunity to complete educational goals in such a program.

Mission, Educational Programs, and the Curriculum

Distance learning should remain consistent with and central to the stated mission of the institution. The educational policies of the institution regarding distance learning programs should be clearly stated, and the distance learning curriculum should demonstrate appropriate rigor and breadth if degrees or certificates are awarded. 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. Students should be able to move easily from the distance education curriculum to other curricula of the college.

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 learning. Policies regarding faculty loads, class size, time allowed for course development, and compensation need to be appropriate for the context of distance learning. 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 learning should include appropriate recognition of all scholarly activities.

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 learning programs will permit completion of learning outcomes and objectives in the same manner as those delivered in traditional programs. 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 learning 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

in working independently and in 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. Student access to faculty should also be a major program ingredient, and issues about the evaluation of student work should be addressed.

Access for learning or physically challenged students may pose some special concerns since these students frequently avail themselves of distance learning. These students often will indicate that they would not be likely to be taking courses at all were it not for the availability of such an education. The college may need to consider special services or additional equipment for these students.

Library and Learning Resources

Availability and use of appropriate, equivalent, (and sometimes personalized) learning resources are essentials of a supportive and successful distance learning 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. Special funding may be necessary.

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 develop distance learning outcome and assessment strategies. Such strategies should take into account how distance learning programs compare with more traditional programs in such areas as 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 learning.

Organization, Planning, Human Resources

The college community must understand the connection between the distance learning 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. Those involved with the administration of such programs should provide an appropriate infrastructure and possess skills appropriate to such an

endeavor-especially technological proficiency and the ability to communicate with all constituencies. 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. Evaluation should focus on the relevance, effectiveness, and efficiency of the institution's distance learning program, as well as on assessment of student learning, retention, and satisfaction. The institution should also demonstrate preparedness to deal with such problems as computer viruses, hackers, computer crime, etc.

Facilities and Equipment

In integrating a distance learning 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 planning and budgeting activities. The technology should support the program's design, and planning for obsolescence should be evident. Expenditure patterns should demonstrate commitment to providing the resources necessary to ensure success and effectiveness, as well as continuity and integrity of the program.

Catalogs and Publications

As an official document of the institution, the catalog should clearly describe the distance learning 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 learning 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 which should be considered when developing distance learning programs as well as in evaluating their effectiveness, the Substantive Change Policy and the Policy on Distance Learning, Including Electronically-Mediated Learning.

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 policy, cited below, describes the intent, processes, and procedures substantive change. It can also be found in the *Accreditation Reference Handbook* or the Commission's web site: www.accjc.org.

Policy on Distance Learning, Including Electronically-Mediated Learning

(Adopted June 2001; Edited August 2004)

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 assure 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 Learning

Distance learning is defined, for the purposes of accreditation review, as a formal interaction designed for learning in which any portion of the interaction occurs when the student is separated by location from the instructor, resources used to support learning, or other students. Distance learning may employ correspondence study, audio, video, or computer technologies. Educational interactions delivered through these means may occur on campus as well as off campus. These interactions may be synchronous or asynchronous.

Policy Statement

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.

Principles

- Development, implementation, and evaluation of all courses and programs, including those offered electronically, 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 electronically.

- Institutions are expected to have clearly defined and appropriate student learning outcomes in all courses and programs, including those delivered through electronic means.

- 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 give the ACCJC advance notice, through the Substantive Change process, of intent to: initiate a new delivery mode, such as electronically-delivered courses; or offer 50% of a program through a mode of distance or electronic delivery.

Guidelines for Implementation

Curriculum and Instruction

- ❑ Each electronically-delivered course or program of study results in learning outcomes appropriate to the rigor and breadth of the course credit, degree, or certificate awarded.

- ❑ A degree or certificate program delivered partially or entirely through electronic means is coherent and complete and results in learning outcomes comparable to those delivered through other means.

- ❑ Student experiences result in achievement of intended learning outcomes whether electronically-delivered courses provide for synchronous or asynchronous interaction between faculty and students and among students.

- ❑ Portions of courses delivered through electronic means adhere to the same principles as courses delivered entirely through these means.

Institutional Context and Commitment

Role and Mission

- ❑ Delivery of courses and programs through electronic means is consistent with the institution's role and mission.

- ❑ Review and approval processes ensure the appropriateness of electronic delivery to meeting the course and program objectives.

- ❑ Specific needs of students for whom electronically delivered courses are intended are identified and addressed.

Learning Resources

- ❑ Appropriate learning resources are available to students who take electronically delivered courses.

Students and Student Services

❑ Students receive clear, complete, and timely information on the curriculum, course and degree requirements, nature of faculty/student interaction, assumptions about technological competence and skills, technical equipment requirements, availability of academic support services and financial aid resources, and costs and payment policies.

❑ Enrolled students have reasonable and adequate access to the range of student services appropriate to support their learning and assess their progress.

❑ Students have the background, knowledge, and technical skills needed to successfully use the technology involved in their course work.

❑ Advertising, recruiting, and admissions materials clearly and accurately represent the courses and programs, and the services available.

Commitment to Support

❑ The institution demonstrates a commitment to ongoing program support, both financial and technical, and to continuation of the program for a period sufficient to enable students to complete a degree/certificate.

❑ The institution ensures that qualified faculty provide appropriate oversight of courses delivered electronically.

❑ The institution gives appropriate consideration to the technical skills and needs of faculty assigned to teach through electronic means.

❑ The faculty evaluation process provides a means to evaluate technical skills when appropriate.

❑ The institution provides faculty training and support services specifically related to teaching via electronic means.

Evaluation and Assessment

❑ The institution evaluates the educational effectiveness of electronically-delivered course work, including assessments of student learning outcomes, student retention, and student and faculty satisfaction. Students have access to such evaluation data.

❑ The institution provides for assessment of student achievement in each course and at completion of a program.

Questions to Aid in the Evaluation of Distance Learning

An institution offering courses through electronic or other modes of distance delivery is expected to meet ACCJC standards and policies. The questions below are provided to assist institutions in undertaking discussions as part of self study development. Evaluation teams will similarly use them in assessing quality.

Curriculum and Instruction

◆ What means does the institution have to ensure that courses intended for electronic or other modes of distance delivery are developed through a process similar to traditionally-delivered courses?

◆ How does the institution ensure that courses and programs provide for timely and effective interaction between students and faculty?

◆ How does the institution ensure that courses and programs provide for effective interaction among students?

◆ How does the institution ensure that faculty has responsibility for and exercise oversight of electronically-delivered courses and programs, ensuring both the rigor of those courses and programs and the quality of instruction?

◆ How does the institution ensure that the technology used is appropriate to the nature and objectives of the courses and programs?

◆ How does the institution ensure the currency of materials, courses, and programs?

◆ How clear and effective are the institution's distance learning policies concerning ownership of materials, faculty compensation, copyright issues, and the utilization of revenue derived from the creation and production of software, telecourses, or other media products?

◆ How does the institution ensure that appropriate faculty support services specifically related to distance learning are provided?

◆ How does the institution provide effective training for faculty who teach using electronic means?

Evaluation and Assessment

◆ How does the institution assess student capability to succeed in electronically delivered courses and programs? How is this information applied to admission and recruiting? How effective is this assessment?

◆ How does the institution evaluate the educational effectiveness of its electronically-delivered courses and programs (including assessments of student learning outcomes, student retention, and student satisfaction) to ensure comparability to traditionally-delivered courses and programs?

◆ How does the institution ensure the integrity of student work and the credibility of the degrees and credit it awards?

Library and Learning Resources

◆ How does the institution ensure that students have access to and can effectively use appropriate information resources?

◆ How does the institution monitor whether students make appropriate use of learning resources?

◆ How does the institution provide laboratories, facilities, and equipment appropriate to the courses or programs?

Student Services

◆ How does the institution provide adequate access to the range of student services appropriate to support the programs, including admissions, financial aid, academic advising, delivery of course materials, and placement, and counseling?

◆ How does the institution provide an adequate means for resolving student complaints?

◆ What advertising, recruiting, and admissions information does the institution provide to students that adequately and accurately represents the programs, requirements, and services available?

◆ How does the institution ensure that students admitted possess the knowledge and equipment necessary to use the technology employed in the course or program?

◆ How does the institution provide assistance to students who are experiencing difficulty using the required technology?

Facilities and Finances

◆ How does the institution ensure that equipment and maintenance required for electronically-delivered courses and programs are provided effectively?

◆ How are facilities, staffing, equipment, and other resources associated with the viability and effectiveness of the electronically delivered courses and programs reflected in the institution's long-range planning, budgeting, and policy development processes?

Substantive Change Policy

(Adopted October 1972, Revised January 1978, June 1991, June 1996,
Edited October 1997 Revised January 2002, Edited June 2002, and August 2004)

Background

Accreditation, a voluntary process of peer review dependent on recognized standards of good practice, is in part an affirmation that the institution:

- Has clearly defined objectives appropriate to higher education;
- Has established conditions under which the achievement of these objectives can reasonably be expected;
- Presents evidence that it is in fact accomplishing the objectives substantially;
- Is so organized, staffed, and supported that it can be expected to continue to do so; and
- Demonstrates that it meets Commission standards, eligibility requirements, and policies.

The scope of an institution's accreditation covers everything done in its name.

Policy

A substantive change is a change which alters: the mission, scope, or name of the institution; the nature of the constituency served; the location or geographical area served; the control of the institution; the content of courses or programs to an extent which represents a significant departure from current curricula or the mode of delivery of a program so that the courses constitute 50% or more of a program and/or are offered at a distance or through electronic delivery; or the credit awarded to courses or programs. Since it is the Commission's responsibility to determine the effect of a substantive change on the quality, integrity, and effectiveness of the total institution, it is the Commission's policy that such changes must be approved by the Commission prior to implementation. When an institution proposes to make a change which is considered substantive, the change must be approved according to the Substantive Change Approval Process. Upon successful review and approval, the institution's accreditation will be extended to areas affected by the change. Note that institutions scheduled for a Comprehensive Visit may not employ the substantive change approval process in the six month period preceding the visit. Also, when the Commission defers an action on accredited

status, or places an institution on a sanction such as Warning, Probation, or Show Cause, the Commission may defer consideration of any substantive change request until the conditions that caused the Commission to defer a decision on accredited status or to impose a sanction have been addressed and the Commission has reaffirmed accreditation.

The following changes are all substantive changes:

1. Change in mission, scope, or name of the institution.

   - A change in the purpose or character of the institution.
   - A change in the degree level from that which was previously offered by the institution.
   - Any change in the official name of the institution.

2. Change in the nature of the constituency served.

   - A change in the intended student clientele.
   - Closure of an institution.

3. Change in the location or geographical area served.

   - Offering courses or programs outside the geographic region currently served.
   - Moving to a new location.
   - Establishing an additional location geographically apart from the main campus, at which students can complete at least 50% of an educational program.
   - Closing a location geographically apart from the main campus at which students can complete at least 50% of an educational program.

4. Change in the control of the institution.

   - Any change in the legal status, form of control, or ownership of the institution.
   - Merging with another institution.
   - Contracting for the delivery of courses or programs in the name of the institution with a non-regionally accredited organization.
   - A change by a parent institution of one of its off-campus sites into a separate institution.

5. Change in courses or programs or their mode of delivery that represents a significant departure from current practice.

   • Addition of a program that represents a significant departure from an institution's current programs.
   • Addition of courses that represent a significant departure from the current curricula of an institution.
   • Addition of courses that constitute 50% or more of a program or 50% of the college's courses offered through a mode of distance or electronic delivery.

6. A change in credit awarded.

   • An increase of 50% or more in the number of credit hours awarded for the successful completion of a program.
   • A change from clock hours to credit hours.

Substantive Change Approval Process

Institutions wishing to effect a substantive change should follow these procedures. Note that institutions which have been declared eligible for accreditation but have not yet achieved candidate or accredited status, institutions on sanction, and institutions for whom action on accredited status has been deferred by the Commission may not employ the substantive change approval process.

1. Notify the Commission

The institution begins the Substantive Change Approval Process by notifying the Commission of the proposed change, the need for the change, and the anticipated effects. Commission staff determine whether or not the proposed change is indeed substantive. Early notification enables the staff to provide information and advice about how the institution might best proceed through the Substantive Change Process.

2. Preparing the Substantive Change Proposal

If the Commission staff determines that the proposed change is substantive in nature, the institution is asked to submit a Substantive Change Proposal for review by the Commission's Committee on Substantive Change.

The Substantive Change Proposal should include the following:

A. A concise description of the proposed change and the reasons for it.

B. A description of the educational program(s) to be offered and evidence that the educational purposes of the change are clear and appropriate if the substantive change involves a new educational program.

C. A description of the planning process which led to the request for the change, how the change relates to the institution's stated mission, the assessment of needs and resources which has taken place, and the antici-pated effect of the proposed change on the rest of the institution.

D. Evidence that the institution has provided adequate human, manage-ment, financial, and physical resources and processes to initiate, main-tain, and monitor the change and to assure that the activities undertaken are accomplished with acceptable quality. If the substantive change is to establish a branch campus, private institutions must include projected revenues and expenditures and cash flow at a branch campus. Public in-stitutions, in keeping with the financial reporting requirements of their district, system, or governmental agency, must include financial informa-tion which allows for comparable analysis of the financial planning and management of a branch campus. If the change involves the formation of a separate institution from an off-campus center or branch campus, the projected financial information must be provided for the parent institu-tion of the proposed split. The new separate institution must begin the process for separate accreditation.

E. Evidence that the institution has received all necessary internal or external approvals. The proposal should state clearly what faculty, ad-ministrative, governing board, or regulatory agency approvals are needed and evidence that any legal requirements have been met.

F. Evidence that each Eligibility Requirement will still be fulfilled after the change. Any requirements that are particularly impacted by the change should be addressed in detail.

G. Evidence that each accreditation standard will still be fulfilled after the change and that all relevant Commission policies are addressed. Any standards that are particularly impacted by the change should be addressed in detail.

H. Other information requested by Commission staff that is pertinent to the specific nature of the change.

3. **Commission Action**

   Once the Substantive Change Proposal is received by the Commission, it is reviewed by the Commission's Committee on Substantive Change, which has full authority to act. The Committee may approve or deny a substantive change request or return it to the institution for additional information. At its discretion, the Committee may refer the decision on the substantive change request to the entire Commission at its next meeting. Commission staff keep the institution informed as to the status of the substantive change request. The institution is notified of the Committee action within two weeks of the Committee meeting. Denial of the request will include reasons for the denial.

4. **Appeal**

   If the institution wishes to appeal the decision of the Commission's Committee on Substantive Change, the appeal must be filed in writing and will be deliberated at the next meeting of the Commission. Members of the Committee on Substantive Change may participate in the discussion but will abstain from voting on the appeal.

5. **Referral to the Commission**

   In the event a substantive change request has been referred to the Commission for consideration, the institution will be notified of Commission action within two weeks of the meeting at which action occurred. In the event that the change is judged to be of such magnitude as to potentially affect the candidate or accredited status of the institution, the review process for the substantive change may be expanded to include a review of the accreditation status of the institution and a visit.

6. **Future Visits**

   Approved substantive changes should be addressed in the next comprehensive review of the institution. If the institution is not due for a comprehensive evaluation within two years of the approval of the substantive change, an on-site evaluation, or other measures as the Commission may determine, may be required. Costs for an on-site evaluation will be borne by the institution. (Note: Off-campus centers, including branch campuses that offer 50% or more of a program, are subject to an on-site inspection within the first six months of establishment. Institutions undergoing changes in ownership, control, and/or legal status will be visited within six months of the implementation of the change.)

The Commission reserves the right to request a report and visit to assess the effects of any substantive change it deems to be a very significant departure from the past, including a requirement to submit periodic prescribed reports and support special visit(s) by representatives of the Commission.