POLICY ON DISTANCE LEARNING

Board of Governors for Higher Education State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations

Adopted:	08/07/97	(BG)			Lega	al Citation

PURPOSE

This document delineates the policy regarding the offering in Rhode Island by way of distance learning of postsecondary-level for-credit courses, programs, degrees, or certificates.

PREMISE

With the expansion of telecommunications capabilities, the circumstances of learning in our society are witnessing profound changes, and the concept of distance learning is at the center of discussions about how those changes will affect postsecondary education. As distance education opportunities proliferate, it is prudent that the Rhode Island Board of Governors for Higher Education promulgate a policy on distance learning that will encourage the development of quality courses and programs; however, it is essential that this policy be workable and enforceable.

DEFINITIONS

The following definitions pertain to this policy:1

- 1. Distance learning. Distance learning is a system and a process that connects learners with distributed learning resources. While distance learning takes a wide variety of forms, all distance learning is characterized by:
 - 1. Separation of place and/or time between instructor and learner, among learners, and/or between learners and learning processes.
 - 2. Interaction between the learner and the instructor, among learners, and/or between learners and learning resources conducted through one or more media; use of electronic media is not necessarily required.
- 2. Provider. The provider is the organization or entity that creates and facilitates the learning opportunity. Providers may include colleges and universities, schools, businesses and industries, professional organizations, labor unions, government agencies, the military, and other public and private organizations.

¹Definitions for distance learning and provider are taken wholly or in part from: American Council on Education, *Guiding Principles for Distance Learning in a Learning Society*, Washington, D.C., 1996.

- 3. Physical presence. A provider has a physical presence if:
 - 1. it is physically located within the borders of Rhode Island; or
 - 2. it maintains or sends within the borders of Rhode Island employees or paid representatives whose purpose is to conduct any activities, including, but not limited to the following: recruitment of students, advising of students, offering courses or programs, administration of examinations.

POLICY

This Board of Governors policy on distance learning applies in three cases: 1) providers with no physical presence in Rhode Island, 2) providers with a physical presence in Rhode Island, other than the three public institutions of higher education, and 3) institutions in the Rhode Island system of public higher education.

- 1) It shall be the policy of the Board of Governors for Higher Education that, so long as a provider of distance learning has no physical presence in Rhode Island, it will not be subject to Board of Governors regulations.
- 2) If a provider has or seeks to establish a physical presence in Rhode Island, it shall be subject to the appropriate set of Board of Governors regulations and Rhode Island Office of Higher Education standards. These regulations and standards are:
 - Regulations Governing Institutions of Higher Education Operating in Rhode Island [name as of 6/18/98]
 - Regulations Governing Proprietary Schools in Rhode Island
 - © Correspondence Schools: Standards for Approval for Solicitation in Rhode Island
- 3) Institutions in the Rhode Island system of public higher education (Community College of Rhode Island, Rhode Island College and University of Rhode Island) are subject to the *Regulations Governing Academic Changes in Rhode Island Public Institutions of Higher Education* [name as of 6/18/98], and the following principles pertaining to the development and implementation of distance learning opportunities.
 - The system and its institutions should strive to be leaders in the development and implementation of distance learning opportunities, building on established system and institutional missions and quality academic programs.
 - Distance learning should improve and increase students= accessibility to education opportunities (e.g., by allowing for more flexible scheduling of class time or location).

- Distance learning should enhance students= educational opportunities (e.g., by providing courses and/or programs not otherwise available, by providing alternate modes of instruction to respond to different learning styles.)
- While distance learning should provide opportunities to use resources more efficiently, the maintenance of academic quality must remain paramount. The institutions shall conduct the necessary oversight to guarantee the quality of the distance learning offerings.
- Whenever possible, distance learning opportunities should promote collaboration across the system (e.g., the sharing of courses, programs, faculty).

PROCEDURES

The Rhode Island Office of Higher Education shall have on file consumer protection information regarding distance learning for individuals who make inquiries and shall maintain such information on the Rhode Island Office of Higher Education World Wide Web site.

To implement this policy within the system, the Rhode Island Office of Higher Education shall develop *Standards for Distance Learning in the Rhode Island System of Public Higher Education*. The standards shall be reviewed by the Board of Governors Planning and Program Committee and shall be adopted by the Rhode Island Postsecondary Education Executive Council (PEEC).