

**GUIDELINES FOR DISTANCE LEARNING IN
INSTITUTIONS SUBJECT TO THE *REGULATIONS GOVERNING INSTITUTIONS OF
HIGHER EDUCATION
OPERATING IN RHODE ISLAND***

SCOPE: WHAT THESE GUIDELINES COVER¹

These guidelines pertain to any distance learning course or program offered by or at any institution subject to the *Regulations Governing Institutions of Higher Education Operating in Rhode Island*. The guidelines govern the development, implementation and assessment of distance learning courses and programs by the institution. Further, these guidelines apply to any distance learning course that is required for (or suggested as an elective as part of) a program at any institution operating in Rhode Island under the regulations, regardless of where instruction is actually received. Except where noted, the guidelines apply both to the institution granting credit and to the institution offering the course, which may not necessarily be the same.

These guidelines do not pertain in the case of a student freely taking a course or program from a provider of distance education outside of Rhode Island. They do not apply when a student seeks to transfer distance learning courses or clock hours taken from a provider outside of Rhode Island to an institution in Rhode Island. In such a case, it is the responsibility of the institution to determine whether the course or hours are acceptable.

Courses or programs delivered or received through distance learning are subject to the Board of Governors' *Regulations Governing Institutions of Higher Education Operating in Rhode Island*.

GUIDELINES FOR THE MAINTENANCE OF QUALITY IN DISTANCE LEARNING COURSES AND PROGRAMS

In *Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs*, a joint statement of commitment for the evaluation of electronically offered degree and certificate programs, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) and the other regional accrediting commissions note that “institutions are responsible for the education provided in their name.”² Any distance learning course or program offered or received by one of the institutions subject to the *Regulations Governing Institutions of Higher Education Operating in Rhode Island* must meet the quality standards maintained for on-campus, credit instruction, and the institutions should be aware of the following regarding distance learning courses and programs:

¹ Definitions pertaining to these guidelines appear at the end of this document.

² Several of the guidelines in this document are based on the *Best Practices*; in particular, guidelines A.1, B.1, B.2, B.3, C.2, D.1, D.2, F.1, G.1, and H.1 are derived from that document. As its title indicates, *Best Practices* provides guidelines for developing quality electronically mediated programs. It can be found online at www.neasc.org/cihe/best_practices_electronically_offered_degree.htm.

A. INSTITUTIONAL MISSION

1. Distance learning programs should be consistent with the role and mission of the institution and compatible with the institution's other programs and activities.

B. PROGRAM

1. The institution must ensure that distance learning programs are coherent and complete and of the same rigor and breadth as on-campus, credit programs. Further, the institution must ensure that students who enroll in a program have access to all courses required to complete the program.
2. Appropriately qualified faculty should participate fully in the development of distance learning program curricula and course content.
3. Technologies should be carefully chosen to complement the curriculum and to further the instructional objectives, particularly those that relate to the development and application of job-related skills.
4. Each course delivered through distance learning must include procedures for monitoring and assessing student performance. These procedures must be at least equivalent to those used in comparable on-campus, credit courses. Criteria for student success in distance learning courses must be at least as rigorous and comprehensive as those used in on-campus, credit courses.
5. Each distance learning course must provide timely feedback to students regarding their progress and performance by methods equivalent to those used in on-campus, credit courses.
6. Each distance learning course must provide an opportunity for interaction between students and the faculty responsible for the course so that students can receive prompt responses to their questions.

C. FACULTY

1. Faculty members teaching distance learning courses must be regularly employed faculty or must meet the standards and procedures used by the institution for the appointment of faculty responsible for on-campus, credit instruction.
2. Faculty should receive appropriate training in effective strategies for using distance instruction to enhance student learning; they must also receive adequate technical, design and production support as they develop and teach courses.
3. Procedures for evaluation of faculty responsible for distance learning courses or programs may be different from, but must be equivalent to, those used by the institution for the evaluation of faculty teaching on-campus, credit courses.

4. Whenever the enrollment in a distance learning course substantially exceeds the number of students normally taught in a similar class at the institution, the institution should consider assigning either additional faculty or appropriate instructional assistants to provide student access to an instructor.

D. STUDENTS

1. Students who enroll in a distance learning course or program must satisfy the same requirements for admission to the institution granting the credit that would be expected of students enrolling in the same course or program delivered in the traditional manner.
2. Institutional policies regarding cheating and plagiarism should be reviewed periodically to ensure that they cover issues related to distance learning.

E. ADMINISTRATION

1. Administrative oversight of distance courses or programs must be comparable to that of the other programs offered by the institution.
2. Institutions providing courses or programs at a distance must ensure that they comply with the laws and regulations of the jurisdictions in which they operate.

F. INSTRUCTIONAL RESOURCES AND TECHNICAL SUPPORT

1. The institution must provide students and faculty with appropriate technical support for each of the technologies required in a distance learning course or program. Further, the institution must seek to provide a consistent technical framework and to minimize the impact of necessary changes in technologies.
2. Each student enrolled in a distance learning course or program must have access to appropriate academic support services which are equivalent whenever possible to those the institution provides for students enrolled in on-campus, credit courses or programs.
3. Each student enrolled in a distance learning course or program must have timely access to the appropriate instructional resources required for success in the course or program.

G. FACILITIES AND CAPITAL EQUIPMENT

1. The institution must ensure that facilities and other capital equipment are adequate to support distance learning courses and programs it offers or receives.

H. FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. Distance learning courses and programs must be adequately considered in the institution's budgetary planning.

I. EVALUATION AND PLANNING

1. When selecting courses and programs to offer, procedures for evaluation of the organization, content and delivery of distance learning courses and programs may be different from, but must be equivalent to, those used by the institution for evaluation of the organization, content and delivery of on-campus, credit courses and programs.
2. In the event a degree-granting institution seeks to contract with a provider to supply 50 percent or more of a program's requirements by distance learning, the provider must be accredited by the applicable regional accrediting agency; in the event an institution that grants certificates only seeks to contract with a provider to supply 50 percent or more of a program's requirements by distance learning, the provider must be accredited by the applicable national accrediting agency.
3. Each institution that offers distance learning courses or programs must use the same evaluation procedures to assess these courses and programs that are used for on-campus, credit offerings. However, at a minimum, students in distance learning courses and programs should be requested to complete a student assessment sheet for each of these courses taken.
4. Distance learning courses and programs must be subject to a regular ongoing assessment by the institution. Periodically, the institution must evaluate the effectiveness of these offerings and reconsider whether the course or program is appropriately taught by distance learning instruction.

GUIDELINES FOR AGREEMENTS AMONG ENTITIES

When an institution is either to provide a distance learning course or program to or to receive a distance learning course or program from another entity, an agreement must be signed between the institution and the other entity that covers, at a minimum, the criteria described in this section.

1. Accreditation. Evidence of the appropriate accreditation(s) should be provided in the event a institution seeks to contract with a provider to supply 50 percent or more of a program's requirements by distance learning.
2. Administrative Structure of the Program. The agreement should delineate which administrative officers are responsible for the course or program and which entity will grant credit.

3. Course or Program. Agreements should describe purpose, intended clientele, and student admission and retention requirements.

In the case of a course, the agreement should further provide a description of the course, the number and level of credits or clock hours to be earned, beginning and ending dates, instructional methodology and assessment methods.

In the case of a program, in addition to providing the information specified above for each required and elective course in the program, the agreement should describe the complete program fully, including course distribution requirements, options, and the total number and level of credits/clock hours required for completion. Further, the agreement should indicate the anticipated schedule of course offerings and, if applicable, provide evidence that the program satisfies state or national licensing or credentialing requirements.

4. Student Costs, Services and Rights. Agreements must describe complete costs to students, refund policies, complaint procedures, recordkeeping arrangements, and all student services that will be available and which entity will provide them.
5. Faculty. All agreements must describe the faculty who will be teaching the course or courses, including field of preparation, experience in the teaching field, licenses held, highest degree earned, and full-time/part-time status. Agreements between entities must address faculty compensation, workload and intellectual property issues.
6. Instructional Resources. Agreements should describe instructional equipment, instructional support equipment, instructional support personnel, and library facilities, and delineate which entity will supply these.
7. Facilities. Agreements should describe classroom spaces and other physical resources and which entity will supply these.
8. Fiscal Responsibilities. Agreements between entities should outline the total costs to the entity receiving the course/program and when and how reimbursement will be made.

DEFINITIONS

The following definitions pertain to these guidelines:³

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:

³ Definitions 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.

- a. Separation of place and/or time between instructor and learner, among learners, and/or between learners and learning resources;
 - b. 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. Institution. One of the institutions operating under the Board of Governors' *Regulations Governing Institutions of Higher Education Operating in Rhode Island*.
 3. Provider. The provider is an organization or entity that creates and facilitates the learning opportunity. Providers may include schools, institutions, colleges and universities, businesses and industries, professional organizations, labor unions, government agencies, the military, and other public and private organizations.
 4. Receiver. The receiver is an organization or entity that receives and facilitates the learning opportunity. Receivers may include schools, institutions, colleges and universities, businesses and industries, professional organizations, labor unions, government agencies, the military, and other public and private organizations.
 5. Entity. An entity is an institution, a provider or a receiver.