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# Distance Education Policy Standards: A Review of Current Regional and National Accrediting Organizations in the United States

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## Abstract

A review of distance education accreditation policies and standards written by the six United States regional accrediting commissions and two national accrediting organizations: the Middle States Commission on Higher Education; the New England Association of Schools and Colleges - Commission on Institutions of Higher Education; the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools - The Higher Learning Commission; Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities; Southern Association of Colleges and Schools-Commission on Colleges; the Western Association of Schools and Colleges Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges; the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools; and the Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges. The proliferation of the distance education policies introduced by these accrediting bodies within the last decade creates a need to review how these policies articulate institutional context and commitment; curriculum and instruction; faculty and faculty support; student support; and evaluation and assessment for institutions undergoing or about to undergo accreditation review.

## Distance Education Policy Standards: A Review of Regional and National Accrediting Organizations in the United States

Distance education accreditation standards and related policies have grown in substance and quantity since the late 1990's, a period when many colleges and universities began offering DE courses for the first time. The U.S. Department of Education has been regularly including distance education in its detailed review of all agencies seeking initial or continued recognition since December 1999. Prior to July 2010, the U.S. Department of Education made a determination as to whether an agency's scope of recognition included the accreditation of distance education. After July 2010, "at each review for renewal of recognition, an agency will be expected to demonstrate its evaluation of distance education and/or correspondence education in order to retain distance education and/or correspondence education in its scope of recognition." This series of events prompted the creation of distance education best practices, standards, and policies by national and regional accreditation agencies across the U.S. The accreditation agencies reviewed in this report have published a number of policies/standards and guidelines to evaluate colleges and universities' distance education programs (U.S. Department of Education, N.D.).

This article is a review of distance education accreditation policies and standards written by the six United States regional accrediting commissions and two national accrediting organizations. The eight accrediting commissions are:

1. Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)
2. New England Association of Schools and Colleges - Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (NEASC-CIHE)
3. North Central Association of Colleges and Schools - The Higher Learning Commission (NCA-HLC)
4. Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)
5. Southern Association of Colleges and Schools-Commission on Colleges (SACS-COC)
6. Western Association of Schools and Colleges Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC-WASC)
7. Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS), 2013
8. Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges (ACCSC)

These accrediting agencies are recognized "as reliable authorities concerning the quality of education or training offered by the institutions of higher education or higher education programs they accredit" by the U.S. Secretary of Education (U.S. Department of Education, ND).

As stated above, distance education programs have grown in abundance in the United States since the late 1990's. The first author began her employment at a community college in the southeast, in 1997; the same semester that the college's first distance education course was offered. Although she had taught courses that were computer-based in the early 1990's at a community college in Ohio; the courses were offered as face-to-face courses. She joined the college's planning and research department in 2002, as a research specialist and grant writer, to help the college prepare for its reaffirmation with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools-Commission on Colleges (SACS-COC). During this time, the head of her department was preparing a substantive change prospectus as requested by SACS-COC regarding the college's distance education program. The author prepared statistical reports about distance education courses as documentation for the prospectus. It is important to note that very few policies and guidelines regarding the delivery of distance education programs were available in 2002. A search for distance education guidelines for institutions undergoing the reaffirmation of accreditation in 2002-2003 yields information that is general and very brief.

The SACS-COC approval of the substantive change prospectus for the college's distance education program paved the way for its growth and success. In the following years, the author continued her role of preparing accreditation responses and supporting documentation for the college's fifth-year interim report and then for the next ten-year reaffirmation review. She chose to review accreditation guidelines and policies regarding distance education for this article because of the changes in accreditation review requirements. The immense growth of distance education in higher education and resulting abundance of policies and guidelines has impacted the preparation of accreditation reports in many capacities.

One of the major resources used for this review and comparison of distance education policies/standards is a publication titled, *Interregional Guidelines for the Evaluation of Distance Education (Online Learning)* (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC), 2011), authored by the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions. The Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC) is made up of the

following agencies: Middle States Commission on Higher Education, Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Western Association of Schools and Colleges: Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, and Western Association of Schools and Colleges: Senior College and University Commission. The Interregional Guidelines for the Evaluation of Distance Education Programs (Online Learning) was developed by the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC) and is based on two documents: a 2006 report prepared by the U.S. General Accounting Office, Evidence of Quality in Distance Education Drawn from Interviews with the Accreditation Community (U.S. Department of Education Office of Postsecondary Education, 2006), and, Best Practice Strategies to promote Academic Integrity in Online Education, prepared by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education Cooperative for Educational Technologies (WCET, 2009).” This statement is a quotation from the inside cover page of the Interregional Guidelines for the Evaluation of Distance Education Programs (Online Learning). Its purpose is “to assist institutions in planning distance education and to provide an assessment framework for institutions already involved in distance education.” (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC), 2011)

The focus of this review is the accreditation policies on topics that address distance education: institutional context and commitment; curriculum and instruction; faculty and faculty support; student support services; and student identity issues.

### **Institutional Context and Commitment**

The book, *An Administrator’s Guide to Online Education*, by Shelton and Saltsman, (2005), states in Chapter 2 that “the communication of expectations, desires, and goals to members of the organization is what enables dreams to become a reality.” Institutional commitment to distance education programs should be reflected in the institution’s overarching planning. The Interregional Guidelines for the Evaluation of Distance Education Programs (Online Learning) (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC), 2011) lists various “hallmarks of quality;” the first hallmark addresses the institution’s mission and purposes. The C-RAC analysis/evidence statements include the following:

- The mission statement explains the role of online learning within the range of the institution’s programs and services;
- Institutional and program statements of vision and values inform how the online learning environment is created and supported;
- The office or persons responsible for online learning training programs are clearly identified and have the competencies to accomplish the tasks, including knowledge of the specialized resources and technical support available to support course development and delivery;
- The institution prepares a multi-year budget for online learning that includes resources for assessment of program demand, marketing, appropriate levels of faculty and staff, faculty and staff development, library and information resources, and technology infrastructure;
- As appropriate, the institution incorporates into its online learning programs methods of meeting the stated institutional goals for the student experience at the institution; and
- Senior administrators and staff can articulate how online learning is consonant with the institution’s mission and goals. (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC), 2011)

### **Other Policies That Address Institutional Commitment and Context**

Other policies include information about the technical and physical plant facilities such as the Middle States Commission on Higher Education policy in Standard 13: “An accredited institution is expected to possess or demonstrate: adequate technical and physical plant facilities, including appropriate staffing and technical assistance, to support electronic offerings;” (Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2011, page 59). The following table lists many of the guidelines regarding institutional context and commitment (Table 1).

Table 1 Institutional Context and Commitment	Agency	Date
An accredited institution is expected to possess or demonstrate: consistency of the offerings via distance education or correspondence education with the institution's mission and goals, and the rationale for the distance education delivery;	Middle States Commission on Higher Education	Revised March 2011
An accredited institution is expected to possess or demonstrate: adequate technical and physical plant facilities, including appropriate staffing and technical assistance, to support electronic offerings; and	Middle States Commission on Higher Education	Revised March 2011
An accredited institution is expected to possess or demonstrate: periodic assessment of the impact of distance education on the institution's resources (human, fiscal, physical, etc.) and its ability to fulfill its institutional mission and goals.	Middle States Commission on Higher Education	Revised March 2011
Institutions undertaking the initiation of degrees at a higher or lower level, off-campus programs, programs that substantially broaden the scope of the academic offerings, distance learning programs, correspondence education programs, contractual relationships involving courses and programs, academic programs overseas, or other substantive change demonstrate their capacity to undertake and sustain such initiatives and to assure that the new academic programming meets the standards of quality of the institution and the Commission's Standards and policies. In keeping with Commission policy, institutions initiating substantive changes seek Commission approval prior to implementation. The institution recognizes and takes account of the increased demands on resources made by programs offered at a higher degree level. (and Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, Western Association of Schools and Colleges, 2013)	The New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Standards for Accreditation Adopted 2005 Revisions Adopted 2011	Jun-11
Distance education programs are consistent with the mission and educational objectives of the institution.	Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities - Distance Education Policy	Oct-13
Distance education programs are integrated into the regular planning processes of the institution.	Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities - Distance Education Policy	Oct-13
The institution provides sufficient resources – financial, human, physical, technological – to support its distance education programs. (and Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, Western Association of Schools and Colleges, 2013)	Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities - Distance Education Policy	Oct-13
Operation of distance education programming is incorporated into the governance system of the institution.	Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities - Distance Education Policy	Oct-13
NWCCU practice requires that an institution's distance education programming be reviewed as part of its comprehensive evaluation. Evaluators who visit an institution that offers distance education are encouraged to review the "C-RAC Guidelines for the Evaluation of Distance Education (On-Line Learning)".	Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities - Distance Education Policy	Oct-13
If an institution offers significant distance and correspondence education, it should be reflected in the institution's mission.	Southern Assoc. of Colleges and Schools- Commission on Colleges	Revised January 2012
The objectives of distance education programs and courses of study must be consistent with the mission of the school and its educational and training objectives, and must be readily available for student consideration.	The Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges (ACCSC)	Revised 7/1/2010

### Curriculum and Instructions

Online course development has evolved considerably in the past 15 years from courses that were primarily text-based converted to electronic form, to courses designed specifically for the distributed Internet setting. In, *The Theory and Practice of Online Learning*, Anderson (2011) states "As the nature of Internet users evolves, so do their demands and expectations from e-learning," (page 247). The accrediting agencies' expectations have also evolved. The C-RAC analysis/evidence statements regarding curriculum and instruction include the following:

- Approval of online courses and programs follows standard processes used in the college or university;

- Online learning courses and programs are evaluated on a periodic basis;
- The curricular goals and course objectives show that the institution or program has knowledge of the best uses of online learning in different disciplines and settings;
- Curricula delivered through online learning are benchmarked against on-ground courses and programs, if provided by the institution, or those provided by traditional institutions;
- The curriculum is coherent in its content and sequencing of courses and is effectively defined in easily available documents including course syllabi and program descriptions;
- Scheduling of online learning courses and programs provides students with a dependable pathway to ensure timely completion of degrees;
- The institution or program has established and enforces a policy on online learning course enrollments to ensure faculty capacity to work appropriately with students;
- Expectations for any required face-to-face, on-ground work (e.g., internships, specialized laboratory work) are stated clearly;
- Course design and delivery supports student-student and faculty-student interaction;
- Curriculum design and the course management system enable active faculty contribution to the learning environment;
- Assessment of student learning follows processes used in onsite courses or programs and/or reflects good practice in assessment methods; and
- Course and program structures provide schedule and support known to be effective in helping online learning students persist and succeed. (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC), 2011)

**Additional Policies Regarding Curriculum and Instruction**

Many policies echoing the C-RAC guidelines have been written that reflect the quality concerns and standards for curriculum and instruction. The following tables show many of these policies articulated by national and regional accrediting agencies (see Tables 2a, 2b and 2c).

Table 2a		
<p><b>Curriculum and Instructional Delivery</b></p> <p>(a) Regardless of instructional delivery method, the syllabi must identify the course learning objectives. Each course learning objective must support one or more program learning outcomes. (See Glossary definition of Syllabus.)</p> <p>(b) The course must provide sufficient and appropriate opportunities for interaction between faculty and students and among students.</p> <p>(c) Institutions must demonstrate to the Council that the clock or credit hours required and awarded are appropriate for the degrees and credentials offered using a thoroughly developed rationale. Credit award rationales for distance education delivery of courses or programs generally do not use the traditional lecture/laboratory/practicum formulas for credit calculations (See Section 3-1-516, Course and Program Measurement).</p> <p>(d) Curriculum must be administered in a way that maintains security of access.</p> <p>(e) Institutions must demonstrate that the student who registers for a distance education course or program is the same student who participates in and completes the course or program and receives the academic credit. The verification method, at the option of the institution, may include a secure login and pass code, proctored examinations, and other appropriate student authentication or verification technology.</p>	<p>Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools</p>	<p>Effective December 13, 2013</p>

Table 2b		
Curriculum and Instruction	Agency	Date
An accredited institution is expected to possess or demonstrate: distance education or correspondence education offerings (including those offered via accelerated or self-paced time formats) that meet institution-wide standards for quality of instruction, articulated expectations of student learning, academic rigor, and educational effectiveness. If the institution provides parallel on-site offerings, the same institution-wide standards should apply to both; (and Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, Western Association of Schools and Colleges, 2013)	Middle States Commission on Higher Education	Revised March 2011
An accredited institution is expected to possess or demonstrate: demonstrated program coherence, including stated program learning outcomes appropriate to the rigor and breadth of the degree or certificate awarded; (and Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, Western Association of Schools and Colleges, 2013)	Middle States Commission on Higher Education	Revised March 2011
An accredited institution is expected to possess or demonstrate: validation by faculty of any course materials or technology-based resources developed outside the institution;	Middle States Commission on Higher Education	Revised March 2011
The institution offering programs and courses for abbreviated or concentrated time periods or via distance or correspondence learning demonstrates that students completing these programs or courses acquire levels of knowledge, understanding, and competencies equivalent to those achieved in similar programs offered in more traditional time periods and modalities. Programs and courses are designed to ensure an opportunity for reflection and for analysis of the subject matter and the identification, analysis and evaluation of information resources beyond those provided directly for the course.	The New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Standards for Accreditation	Adopted 2005 Revisions Adopted 2011
Courses and programs offered for credit off campus, through distance or correspondence education, or through continuing education, evening or week-end divisions are consistent with the educational objectives of the institution. Such activities are integral parts of the institution and maintain the same academic standards as courses and programs offered on campus. They receive sufficient support for instructional and other needs. Students have ready access to and support in using appropriate learning resources. The institution maintains direct and sole responsibility for the academic quality of all aspects of all programs and assures adequate resources to maintain quality.	The New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Standards for Accreditation	Adopted 2005 Revisions Adopted 2011
The institution's academic unit exercises oversight of distance education programs, ensuring both the rigor of the program and the quality of instruction.	Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities - Distance Education Policy	Oct-13

Table 2c		
Curriculum and Instruction	Agency	Date
Courses and programs offered via distance education maintain the same academic standards as those offered on the main campus.	Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities - Distance Education Policy	Oct-13
The faculty assumes primary responsibility for and exercises oversight of distance and correspondence education, ensuring both the rigor of programs and the quality of instruction.	Southern Assoc. of Colleges and Schools- Commission on Colleges	Revised January 2012
The technology used is appropriate to the nature and objectives of the programs and courses and expectations concerning the use of such technology are clearly communicated to students.	Southern Assoc. of Colleges and Schools- Commission on Colleges	Revised January 2012
Distance and correspondence education policies are clear concerning ownership of materials, faculty compensation, copyright issues, and the use of revenue derived from the creation and production of software, telecourses, or other media products.	Southern Assoc. of Colleges and Schools- Commission on Colleges	Revised January 2012
Academic support services are appropriate and specifically related to distance and correspondence education.	Southern Assoc. of Colleges and Schools- Commission on Colleges	Revised January 2012
Program length is appropriate for each of the institution's educational programs, including those offered through distance education and correspondence education.	Southern Assoc. of Colleges and Schools- Commission on Colleges	Revised January 2012
For all degree programs offered through distance or correspondence education, the programs embody a coherent course of study that is compatible with the institution's mission and is based upon fields of study appropriate to higher education. (and Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, Western Association of Schools and Colleges, 2013)	Southern Assoc. of Colleges and Schools- Commission on Colleges	Revised January 2012
For all courses offered through distance or correspondence education, the institution employs sound and acceptable practices for determining the amount and level of credit awarded and justifies the use of a unit other than semester credit hours by explaining it equivalency.	Southern Assoc. of Colleges and Schools- Commission on Colleges	Revised January 2012

#### Faculty and Faculty Support

The role of faculty in the development of distance education programs and the related topic of faculty support has been a key and sometimes thorny issue during the growth of institutions' distance education programs. Some faculty do not buy-in to the theory of distance education, others have low technology skills for adapting successfully to online instruction, and "many faculty are unprepared for the fundamental differences in the roles required for teaching online," (Shelton & Saltsman,

2005, page 59). The C-RAC guidelines and other accreditation policies about faculty and faculty support provide optimal strategies for addressing these issues. The C-RAC analysis/evidence statements include the following:

- The institution's faculty have a designated role in the design and implementation of its online learning offerings;
- Evaluation strategies ensure effective communication between faculty members who design curriculum, faculty members who interact with students, and faculty members who evaluate student learning;
- Online learning faculties are carefully selected, appropriately trained, frequently evaluated, and are marked by an acceptable level of turnover;
- The institution's training program for online learning faculty is periodic, incorporates tested good practices in online learning pedagogy, and ensures competency with the range of software products used by the institution;
- Faculty are proficient and effectively supported in using the course management system;
- Faculty members engaged in online learning share in the mission and goals of the institution and its programs and are provided the opportunities to contribute to the broader activities of the institution. (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC), 2011)

**Faculty Roles and Faculty Support Addressed in Accreditation Policies**

The following two tables (Table 3a and Table 3b) illustrate some of the regional and national accrediting agencies' policies concerning faculty roles and faculty support.

Table 3a		
Faculty Support	Agency	Date
An accredited institution is expected to possess or demonstrate: an ongoing program of appropriate orientation, training, and support for faculty participating in electronically delivered offerings;	Middle States Commission on Higher Education	Revised March 2011
On-campus faculty have a substantive role in the design and implementation of off-campus programs. Students enrolled in off-campus courses, distance learning courses, and/or correspondence education courses have sufficient opportunities to interact with faculty regarding course content and related academic matters.	The New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Standards for Accreditation	Adopted 2005 Revisions Adopted 2011
On-campus faculty have a substantive role in the design and implementation of distance education programs.	Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities - Distance Education Policy	Oct-13
The institution has clear criteria for the evaluation of faculty teaching distance education courses and programs.	Southern Assoc. of Colleges and Schools- Commission on Colleges	Revised January 2012
An institution offering distance or correspondence learning courses/programs ensures that there is a sufficient number of faculty qualified to develop, design, and teach the courses/programs.	Southern Assoc. of Colleges and Schools- Commission on Colleges	Revised January 2012
Faculty who teach in distance and correspondence education programs and courses receive appropriate training.	Southern Assoc. of Colleges and Schools- Commission on Colleges	Revised January 2012
The faculty assumes primary responsibility for and exercises oversight of distance and correspondence education, ensuring both the rigor of programs and the quality of instruction.	Southern Assoc. of Colleges and Schools- Commission on Colleges	Revised January 2012

Table 3b		
Faculty Support	Agency	Date
<p><b>Faculty and Instructional Support</b></p> <p>(a) The institution must employ academically and/or experientially credentialed faculty to teach online courses appropriate to the subject matter.</p> <p>(b) Faculty hired to facilitate online instruction must be properly trained to utilize the institution’s learning management system for purposes of instruction, communication, and assessment.</p> <p>(c) The instruction must provide an accessible and reliable learning management system and technical support to effectively facilitate online instruction and learning.</p> <p>(d) The institution must demonstrate that the student/teacher ratio appropriately supports faculty and student interaction, facilitation of interaction among students and interaction with curriculum content.</p> <p>(e) The institution must have a faculty development plan on file that is appropriate for each individual. For further information, see Section 3-1-543.</p>	<p>Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools</p>	<p>Effective December 13, 2013</p>

**Student Support**

Effective and well-designed student support services are essential for student success. “Unfortunately, institutions have not been as quick to put student services online as they have online courses,” (Shelton & Saltsman, 2005, page 83) The authors’ experiences as higher education instructors is that gaps and holes exist in the offering of student services for online learners. The gaps in student services can cause a distance education student to feel frustrated and alone. The C-RAC guidelines list administrative as well as practical strategies for providing effective student support services. The C-RAC analysis/evidence statements include the following:

- The recruitment and admissions programs supporting the online learning courses and programs appropriately target the student populations to be served;
- The students enrolled in the institution’s online learning courses and programs fit the admissions requirements for the students the institution intends to serve;
- The institution regularly evaluates the effectiveness of the academic and support services provided to students in online courses and uses the results for improvement;
- The institution’s admissions program for online learning provides good web-based information to students about the nature of the online learning environment, and assists them in determining if they possess the skills important to success in online learning;
- The institution provides an online learning orientation program;
- The institution provides support services to students in formats appropriate to the delivery of the online learning program;
- Students in online learning programs have adequate access to student services, including financial aid, course registration, and career and placement counseling;
- Students in online learning programs have ready access to 24/7 tech support;
- Students using online learning have adequate access to learning resources, including library, information resources, laboratories, and equipment and tracking systems;
- Students using online learning demonstrate proficiency in the use of electronic forms of learning resources;
- Student complaint processes are clearly defined and can be used electronically;
- Publications and advertising for online learning programs are accurate and contain necessary information such as program goals, requirements, academic calendar, and faculty; and
- Students are provided with reasonable and cost-effective ways to participate in the institution’s system of student authentication. (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC), 2011)

Many of the services mentioned above such as online student orientation, library services, student publications, and various tutorials are time-consuming to develop and can be costly; but once in place they are easily updated and maintained. Tables 4a and 4b on Page 17 of this report provide examples of similar policies published by the regional and national accrediting agencies.



Table 4a		
Student Support	Agency	Date
An accredited institution is expected to possess or demonstrate: available, accessible, and adequate learning resources (such as a library or other information resources) appropriate to the offerings at a distance;	Middle States Commission on Higher Education	Revised March 2011
Students enrolled in distance education programs have adequate access to and make effective use of learning resources, including library, information resources, laboratories and equipment.	Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities - Distance Education Policy	Oct-13
Students enrolled in distance education programs have adequate access to student services, including financial aid, academic advising, course registration, and career and placement counseling.	Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities - Distance Education Policy	Oct-13
Students have access to and can effectively use appropriate library resources.	Southern Assoc. of Colleges and Schools- Commission on Colleges	Revised January 2012
Access is provided to laboratories, facilities, and equipment appropriate to the courses or programs	Southern Assoc. of Colleges and Schools- Commission on Colleges	Revised January 2012
Students have adequate access to the range of services appropriate to support the programs offered through distance and correspondence education.	Southern Assoc. of Colleges and Schools- Commission on Colleges	Revised January 2012
Students in distance or correspondence programs have an adequate procedure for resolving their complaints, and the institution follows its policies and procedures.	Southern Assoc. of Colleges and Schools- Commission on Colleges	Revised January 2012
Advertising, recruiting, and admissions information adequately and accurately represent the programs, requirements, and services available to students.	Southern Assoc. of Colleges and Schools- Commission on Colleges	Revised January 2012
Documented procedures assure that security of personal information is protected in the conduct of assessments and evaluations and in the dissemination of results.	Southern Assoc. of Colleges and Schools- Commission on Colleges	Revised January 2012
Students enrolled in distance education courses are able to use the technology employed, have the equipment necessary to succeed, and are provided assistance in using the technology employed.	Southern Assoc. of Colleges and Schools- Commission on Colleges	Revised January 2012

Table 4b		
Student Support	Agency	Date
<b>Student Services</b> 1. Student services must be made available to students enrolled in distance education programs or courses of study in accordance with Section VI, Substantive Standards, Standards of Accreditation. The school must ensure that there is adequate supervision of its student services for students enrolled in a distance education program or course of study. 2. The school must provide orientation to the distance education environment for students enrolled in distance education programs or courses of study. 3. The school must ensure that faculty and staff respond in a timely manner to student questions and concerns, both academic and administrative.	The Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges (ACCSC)	Revised 7/1/2010

### Evaluation and Assessment

Shattuck (2012) states, "Open and distance learning providers who have enjoyed freedom from external scrutiny may resist attempts at external regulation and auditing and look upon QA (quality assurance) as yet another imposition of corporatization and bureaucracy on education. Others see it as a means of establishing a culture of quality, self-reflection and self-improvement," The statement articulates an opinion shared about quality assurance and distance education. Regional and national accrediting policies also address the topics of quality assurance, evaluation and assessment at the institution level, program level and course level with numerous guidelines. The C-RAC analysis/evidence statements include the following:

- Development and ownership of plans for online learning extend beyond the administrators directly responsible for it and the programs directly using it;
- Planning documents are explicit about any goals to increase numbers of programs provided through online learning courses and programs and/or numbers of students to be enrolled in them;
- Plans for online learning are linked effectively to budget and technology planning to ensure adequate support for current and future offerings;
- Plans for expanding online learning demonstrate the institution's capacity to assure an appropriate level of quality;
- The institution and its online learning programs have a track record of conducting needs analysis and of supporting programs.
- The institution demonstrates the appropriate use of technology to support its assessment strategies;
- The institution documents its successes in implementing changes informed by its programs of assessment and evaluation;

- The institution provides examples of student work and student interactions among themselves and with faculty;
- The institution sets appropriate goals for the retention/persistence of students using online learning, assesses its achievement of these goals, and uses the results for improvement; and
- Students express satisfaction with the quality of the instruction provided by online learning faculty members. (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC), 2011).

An example of a national accrediting agency's evaluation policy is show in Table 5a:

Table 5a Evaluation and Assessment	Agency	Date
<p><b>Institutional Assessment and Improvement</b></p> <p>a. The school's institutional assessment and improvement activities must ensure that sufficient facilities, equipment, technology, and other resources and infrastructure associated with distance education are appropriate to the subject matter of the program or courses of study, and are integrated in the long-term institutional assessment and improvement plan and budget of the school.</p> <p>b. The school must directly review and is responsible for the currency and quality of all distance education components as part of its institutional assessment and improvement activities. The school's institutional assessment and improvement activities must meet all necessary requirements outlined in Section I (B), Substantive Standards, Standards of Accreditation.</p>	<p>The Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges (ACCSC)</p>	<p>Revised 7/1/2010</p>

Examples of regional accrediting agencies evaluation and assessment policies are shown in Table 5b on the next page.

Table 5b Evaluation and Assessment	Agency	Date
An accredited institution is expected to possess or demonstrate: planning that includes consideration of applicable legal and regulatory requirements;	Middle States Commission on Higher Education	Revised March 2011
An accredited institution is expected to possess or demonstrate: demonstrated commitment to continuation of offerings for a period sufficient to enable admitted students to complete the degree or certificate in a publicized time frame;	Middle States Commission on Higher Education	Revised March 2011
An accredited institution is expected to possess or demonstrate: assurance that arrangements with consortial partners or contractors do not compromise the integrity of the institution or of the educational offerings;	Middle States Commission on Higher Education	Revised March 2011
The institution's chief academic officer is directly responsible to the chief executive officer, and in concert with the faculty and other academic administrators is responsible for the quality of the academic program. The institution's organization and governance structure <b>assure the integrity and quality of academic programming however and wherever offered.</b> Off-campus, continuing education, distance education, correspondence education, international, evening, and week-end programs are clearly integrated and incorporated into the policy formation, and academic oversight, and evaluation system of the institution.	The New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Standards for Accreditation Adopted 2005 Revisions Adopted 2011	Jun-11
Institutions undertaking the initiation of degrees at a higher or lower level, off-campus programs, programs that substantially broaden the scope of the academic offerings, distance learning programs, correspondence education programs, contractual relationships involving courses and programs, academic programs overseas, or other substantive change demonstrate their capacity to undertake and sustain such initiatives and to assure that the new academic programming meets the standards of quality of the institution and the Commission's Standards and policies. In keeping with Commission policy, institutions initiating substantive changes seek Commission approval prior to implementation. The institution recognizes and takes account of the increased demands on resources made by programs offered at a higher degree level.	The New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Standards for Accreditation	Adopted 2005 Revisions Adopted 2011 6/1/2011
Off-campus, continuing education, distance education, correspondence education, international, evening, and week-end programs are clearly integrated and incorporated into the policy formation, and academic oversight, and evaluation system of the institution.	The New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Standards for Accreditation	Adopted 2005 Revisions Adopted 2011 6/1/2011
The institution evaluates the educational effectiveness of each distance education program, including assessment of student learning outcomes, student retention, and student and faculty satisfaction, to ensure comparability to campus-based programs.	Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities - Distance Education Policy	Oct-13
Publications and advertising for distance education programs are accurate and contain necessary information such as the program's goals, requirements, academic calendar, and faculty.	Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities - Distance Education Policy	Oct-13
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 Commission approval for the substantive change.	Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities - Distance Education Policy	Oct-13
Comparability of distance and correspondence education programs to campus-based programs and courses is ensured by the evaluation of educational effectiveness, including assessments of student learning outcomes, student retention, and student satisfaction.	Southern Assoc. of Colleges and Schools-Commission on Colleges	Revised January 2012
The institution regularly assesses the effectiveness of its provision of library/learning resources and student support services for distance or correspondence education students.	Southern Assoc. of Colleges and Schools-Commission on Colleges	Revised January 2012
An institution entering into consortial arrangements or contractual agreements for the delivery of courses/programs or services offered by distance or correspondence education is an active participant in ensuring the effectiveness and quality of the courses/programs offered by all of the participants.	Southern Assoc. of Colleges and Schools-Commission on Colleges	Revised January 2012

## Student Identity

Most institutions enroll students who receive Federal Student Aid. The U.S. Department of Education requires that institutions have methods in place to verify student identity. There are “unique risks inherent in the distance education environment.” A final audit report published in February 2014 includes the following statement:

"Current requirements related to verifying the identities of and disbursing Title IV funds to students enrolled in distance education programs are not sufficient to mitigate the risks of fraud and abuse. As a result, fraud rings are targeting distance education programs to illegally obtain Title IV funds. The fraud rings enroll straw students, which are students who do not intend to complete a distance education course or program but who still receive Title IV funds. Both the ringleader and the straw student receive a portion of any Title IV credit balance disbursed in the straw student's name." (Office of the Inspector General, US Dept. of Education, 2014)

Other fraud issues include identity questions concerning academic credit and award of degrees, diplomas, and certificates. The C-RAC analysis/evidence statements include:

- The institution has in place effective procedures through which 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. The institution makes clear in writing that these processes protect student privacy and notifies students at the time of registration or enrollment of any projected additional costs associated with the verification procedures.
- The institution's policies on academic integrity include explicit references to online learning;
- Issues of academic integrity are discussed during the orientation for online students; and
- Training for faculty members engaged in online learning includes consideration of issues of academic integrity, including ways to reduce cheating. (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC), 2011)

## Conclusion

The review of regional and national accrediting policies provides an overview of recent developments and improvements in accreditation policies and guidelines regarding distance education. The growth of accreditation policies and guidelines has impacted the preparation and focus of interim and reaffirmation reports for colleges and universities. Although a review of many of the policies and guidelines is beneficial, one publication in particular, the C-RAC Guidelines, is helpful to faculty and staff implementing distance education programs and for higher education staff who write institutional accreditation statements for five-year and ten-year reaffirmation reports.

This review is intended to serve as a starting point for further study. As regional and national accrediting bodies add policies and requirements specifically addressing the quality of distance education offered by institutions in terms of faculty preparation, technological support, instructional strategies employed, and evaluation and assessment, we foresee greater challenges within higher education institutions to make effective and meaningful use of these policies and guidelines. Furthermore, we foresee the possible need for higher education institutions' greater involvement in developing and revising accreditation policies as they relate to distance teaching and learning. Further research is recommended.

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