

## **GUIDELINES FOR ALTERNATIVE, ONLINE, OR DISTANCE EDUCATION DELIVERY OF APPROVED DEGREE PROGRAMS**

The principal mode of offering degree-related courses and programs in the University of North Carolina traditionally has been through regular on-campus, in-residence instructional activities. However, the demand for education beyond the confines of the campus and through alternative delivery systems, such as distance and online technologies, has steadily increased, both from practicing professionals in fields such as education, health professions, business, engineering, and public affairs, and from place-bound nontraditional students. Consequently, off-site and online delivery of degree-related instruction is growing as the University continues to respond to rising demands for educational access. These means allow the University to bring educational opportunity to many students who may find it difficult to relocate to a University campus.

The University launched the University of North Carolina Online on July 1, 2007 and that site lists more than 170 degree, certificate, and licensure programs that are offered by the constitute universities.

This policy statement and associated procedures are intended to ensure (1) that the academic standards of alternative, online, and off-site delivery of academic program are consistent with the standards for programs delivered on-campus, and (2) that unnecessary duplication of effort and resources does not occur among the distance education activities of the constituent institutions of the University, nor among distance education programs and programs delivered to resident students.

### **A. DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAMS AND SITE-BASED FACILITIES**

#### **1. Distance Education**

There are several terms used to describe instruction that is offered away from a campus, such as off-campus or off-site instruction, extension, distance education, e-learning, online, etc. Distance education will be understood to include off-campus instruction for credit (whether face-to-face, electronically mediated, or a combination of methodologies) whether a single course, a certificate program, or a degree program.

#### **2. Proposed Site**

For those programs that are site based, the proposed site will be the North Carolina county or counties in which the proposed site-based degree-related distance education course or program will be delivered. If the delivery site is outside North Carolina then the city and state or country of delivery should be identified.

#### **3. Proposed Site-based Facilities for Distance Delivery**

Any site-based facilities that will be used in distance delivery will need to be identified and described. The description should explain ownership of the facilities and the terms of use including the cost for use for educational delivery.

#### **4. Online Delivery of Programs**

Online delivery normally does not require sites or facilities away from the campus, but where they do a description of the site arrangements should be included.

#### **5. Identification of Students in Distance Learning Programs**

Programs offering distance education must have processes in place to assure that that the student who registers for a distance education course or program is the same student who participates in and completes the program and receives the academic credit.

### **B. PRINCIPLES**

The guiding principles for developing, conducting, and assessing degree-related distance education activities in the University are as follows:

1. The General Administration is responsible for the authorization, coordination and monitoring of degree-related distance education activities in accordance with the governing policies, regulations, and guidelines, and procedures set forth in this statement. General Administration must authorize degree programs and degree completion programs that are offered away from UNC campuses, regardless of the mode of instruction.
2. The constituent institutions and the academic units offering the instruction are responsible for the development, delivery, regular assessment, and accreditation (general and specialized) of specific degree-related distance education courses and programs.
3. Each institution must have a clearly defined process for the review and approval of proposals to plan and, once planning is completed, to establish distance education degree programs. The appropriate campus committees and authorities must approve any notification of planning or request to establish a distance education program before submitting it to General Administration.
4. The academic standards and quality of course and degree-related distance education shall be consistent with and comparable to the academic standards and quality of regular, on-campus instructional activity. The application and maintenance of academic standards are the responsibility of the academic unit and campus offering the instruction.
5. In the course of planning degree-related distance education activities, each constituent institution is urged to consider the potential for collaboration with other institutions in order to avoid unnecessary duplication. Inter-institutional coordination should be completed prior to seeking such authorization from General Administration as may be required to establish the activities.

### **C. ACCREDITATION REQUIREMENTS FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION**

UNC institutions are individually accredited by the Commission on Colleges (COC) of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) and are responsible for ensuring that they follow COC criteria and procedures with respect to any distance education activities that may constitute a substantive change as defined by SACS. With respect to this policy, the Office of Academic Affairs at each institution is responsible for determining whether Procedure One (prior notification and approval) or Procedure Two (prior notification) applies and for complying with the appropriate procedure. However, actual authorization to offer the proposed program will come to the institution

from the General Administration and it will be the institution's responsibility to provide this information to the COC of SACS.

UNC institutions are also responsible for informing themselves of, and complying with, other state or international requirements for licensure or notification when they plan to offer distance education courses or degree programs in other states or nations.

#### **D. DEGREE-RELATED DISTANCE EDUCATION COURSES**

The development and delivery of individual degree-related distance education courses are institutional responsibilities. Courses may be offered without prior approval of General Administration. However, institutions should list these courses on their distance education web site.

The focus of UNC distance education efforts should be primarily at the upper division and graduate levels, and where feasible in collaboration with community colleges. Therefore, except under recognized circumstances (e.g., Independent Studies correspondence courses, iSchool courses for high school students, courses developed primarily for on-campus students), UNC institutions' distance education offerings should not duplicate lower-division (freshman or sophomore) courses that are offered by a community college. In the case of site-based courses, the proposing institution should give the local community college (if located in the city of the proposed site) the opportunity to offer lower division courses before proceeding to offer the courses itself. In the case of electronically-mediated courses, institutions should avoid developing lower-division courses that have already been developed for statewide distribution by a community college except as indicated above. Proposals to offer courses or programs through the Southern Regional Electronic Campus (SREC) will be coordinated through General Administration.

Institutions planning to offer a sequence of courses for certification, licensure, etc. off-campus should notify the General Administration in advance so that such information on these activities can be made accessible through an inventory and a web site maintained by the General Administration. Authorization to establish such courses of study is not required unless the request represents a substantive change as defined by SACS. Procedure Two of the COC Substantive Change policy defines the following as constituting a change requiring prior notification: initiating programs/courses delivered through contractual agreement or consortium.

Information about online courses will be made available through the University of North Carolina Online. Campuses wishing to list their online courses there should provide information about the courses in a timely fashion.

#### **E. DEGREE-RELATED DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

##### **1. Off-campus Instruction Offering 26-49 Percent of a Degree**

COC Substantive Change Procedure Two (prior notification) applies to a) the initiation of site-based/classroom group instruction (where the instructor is present) if the student may earn more than 25 percent and less than 50 percent of credits toward a degree program and this instruction is offered away from the main campus; and b) for distance learning/technology-based group or individual instruction (where the instructor and student are geographically separated), offering first credit courses via distance learning/technology-based instruction by which students can obtain 26 to 49 percent of their credits toward a degree program. Institutions proposing distance education activities that fall within this policy should notify SACS and copy General Administration. Procedure Two also applies to the initiation of significant changes in existing

technology-based delivery systems in distance learning/off-campus programs (without reference to the percent of the courses offered toward the degree). Prior to the initiating of such programs current COC substantive change criteria should be reviewed.

## **2. Distance Education Programs Offering 50 Percent or More of a Degree Program**

Distance education programs in which 50 percent or more of a degree program is provided must be authorized by General Administration. The Division of Academic Affairs will maintain a listing of all UNC distance education degree programs (offering 50 percent or more of the degree program off-campus) being planned, as well as an inventory of all authorized distance degree programs. Both will be available electronically. Before submitting any proposal for a distance education degree program, institutions should ascertain whether a comparable program is being planned or offered by another constituent institution and, if site-based, whether such a program is already offered in the proposed county site (whether off-campus or on-campus). Similarly, institutions proposing an “individual access” (electronically mediated) program should determine whether a comparable “individual access” program is being planned or offered by another constituent institution. If this is the case and the institution decides to proceed with planning, it will be expected to make a compelling case for why its proposal does not constitute unnecessary duplication.

Whenever feasible, arrangements should be made to use the facilities and resources, such as media centers, computer centers, libraries, graduate centers, laboratories, etc., of other constituent institutions or other appropriate institutions such as community colleges when offering site-based distance education programs.

**COC Substantive Change Procedure One** (prior notification and approval) applies to:

- a. Initiating an off-campus (additional) site (site-based/classroom group instruction) or first distance learning program at which students can earn at least 50 percent of an educational program; and
- b. Initiating a branch campus.

In such cases institutions must provide written notification of the proposed change to the COC Executive Director six months in advance of implementation (using the form in Appendix F) and, in response to a request from the Executive Director, an “information copy” of its request to establish a distance education degree program (Appendix G). When a decision is made concerning the request, General Administration will notify the institution and the campus should notify the COC.

**COC Substantive Change Procedure Two** (prior notification) applies to:

With respect to the establishment of distance learning programs offering 50 percent or more of a degree program, COC Substantive Change Procedure Two (prior notification) applies to:

- a. For site-based/classroom group instruction (where the instructor is present): adding significantly different degree programs at a currently approved off-campus site (does not apply to new sites, in which case Procedure One applies).
- b. For distance learning/technology-based group or individual instruction (where the instructor and student are geographically separated): expanding a previously reported program from less than 50 percent of credits to 50 percent or more of a degree program or an entire degree program; or adding significantly different programs from previously reported programs offered through distance learning.

In such cases, institutions should send the COC Executive Director written notification (using the form in Appendix F) prior to implementation. UNC institutions also must submit Appendix G to General Administration.

### **Notification of Intent to Plan:**

Institutions wishing to offer an existing degree program off-campus must submit a notification of intent to plan (Appendix F) to General Administration. The electronic form available on the UNC GA Academic Planning website should be used. The institution should also print a copy of this notification and submit it to the COC Executive Director with a cover letter to fulfill the written notification requirements of Substantive Change Procedures One and Two, or the campus may use its own form of notification to the COC. Such notice may be sent at any time, but at least one month prior to submitting a request to establish (and three months prior to the proposed implementation date) or when the institution is required to notify SACS (whichever comes sooner). Upon receipt of the notification of intent to plan, Academic Affairs will acknowledge receipt of the notification and add this program-planning activity to a list that will be maintained by Academic Affairs and made available to all UNC institutions. All UNC institutions will be expected to consult this list periodically to remain informed about distance education programs being planned by other UNC institutions.

In cases where an institution is proposing a new academic degree program (not currently authorized in its Academic Program Inventory [API]) that will be offered both on-campus and off-campus (or, under special circumstances, only off-campus), it should follow the regular procedure for planning a new degree program. However, the notice or request (Appendices A and B) should include information regarding the intent to offer the program off-campus. This is required because the proposed program must be a part of the institution's official API before it can be offered off-campus.

### **Request to Establish:**

Requests for authorization to establish a degree-related distance education program (Appendix G) must be submitted at least two months prior to the proposed date of establishment (and therefore, as noted previously, notification of intent to plan must be submitted at least three months prior to implementation). If the institution has determined that the program involves a COC Substantive Change Procedure One, Appendix G should also be sent by the institution to COC with a cover letter. Upon authorization of the program by UNC General Administration, UNCA GA will send an authorization letter to the institution with a copy to the COC Executive Director. If the program is site-based and is to be offered outside North Carolina, the institution must also receive clearance from the appropriate licensing authority for the intended site(s), and the proposal must be reviewed by the Educational Planning Committee. Individual access programs that are not site-based outside of North Carolina do not require such clearance. If the request is to establish a new academic degree program, the request to establish a new degree program (Appendix C) must also be completed. It is the responsibility of the institution to ensure that there are (or will be) sufficient funds to support the proposed program through a reasonable period of time for program completion.

### **Discontinuation of Degree-related Distance Education Programs:**

Institutions must notify General Administration when approved distance education programs or certificate/licensure programs are no longer active so that they can be removed from the UNC inventory (Appendix I).

## **F. GENERAL PREREQUISITES FOR INITIATING DEGREE-RELATED DISTANCE EDUCATION**

1. The program that is being proposed as a degree-related distance education program must be authorized in the Academic Program Inventory of the proposing institution. If the proposed distance education program is not currently authorized, the institution must follow the policies, regulations, and guidelines for new academic program development.
2. A proposed degree-related distance education course or program may be delivered through a special instructional division of the institution (e.g., extension), but instruction and supervision must be provided by the same college, school or department offering the course or program in regular term or summer term instruction on-campus.
3. Degree-related distance education programs will be authorized for operation only in instances of clear and demonstrable need.

## **G. PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS**

1. **Admissions Requirements.** Admissions requirements for degree-related distance education programs must be comparable to the admissions requirements of the same programs offered on-campus.
2. **Residence Requirements.** The institution must state clearly its policy regarding the number of credit hours and courses applicable to a distance education degree program, if applicable, which must be earned in residence by regular term or summer term instruction on its campus (or at an authorized graduate center) and must clearly define “residence,” or else the institution must indicate that such a policy is not applicable.

### **3. Curriculum and Instruction**

- a. Programs must provide for timely and appropriate interaction between students and faculty, and among students.
- b. The institution’s faculty must assume responsibility for and exercise oversight over distance education, ensuring both the rigor of programs and the quality of instruction.
- c. The institution must ensure that the technology used is appropriate to the nature and objectives of the programs.
- d. The institution must ensure the currency of materials, programs, and courses.
- e. The institution’s distance education policies must be clear 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.

### **4. Faculty**

- a. Faculty members assigned to teach degree-related distance education courses or programs must be members of the regular faculty of the institution offering the courses or programs or part-time faculty identified specifically to assist as distance education instruction faculty members and fully qualified to teach as determined by the academic department offering the course or program. If the institution has a designated graduate faculty, graduate-level

instructors, whether full-time or part-time faculty members of the institution, must hold membership on the graduate faculty of that institution in accordance with the institutional regulations and policies governing such membership. Full-time and part-time faculty must meet the requirements described in the Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement by the Commission on Colleges of SACS.

- b. Part-time faculty must possess at least the same or equivalent qualifications as the full-time faculty and must be approved formally by the academic department through which credit is to be awarded and such other institutional units or mechanisms as may be required for faculty appointments. Institutions shall adopt policies relating to the employment of part-time faculty which ensure that the use of such faculty does not result in diminished academic quality or in conflicts of interest.
- c. Full-time faculty members may teach courses in distance education programs as a part of their regular load. However, if instead they teach such courses on an overload basis, they shall be limited to no more than one additional course per semester in addition to their regular full-time, on-campus teaching load.
- d. Faculty members employed to teach only distance education courses or programs must have a significant orientation and involvement with the ongoing planning of policies and programs of the academic unit offering these courses or programs to assure their familiarity with the programs. They must also be involved in the assessment of student learning and other evaluation processes.
- e. The institution must provide appropriate faculty support services specifically related to distance education.
- f. The institution must provide appropriate training for faculty who teach in distance education programs.

## **5. Student Services**

- a. The institution must 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. These services must be comparable to the quality and availability of such services provided to students enrolled in programs offered on-campus.
- b. The institution must provide an adequate means for resolving student complaints.
- c. The institution must provide to students advertising, recruiting, and admissions information that adequately and accurately represents the programs, requirements, and services available. There should be a set of written policies, procedures, and guidelines pertaining to degree-related distance education courses and programs which includes information on admissions, curriculum, requirements for completion of the distance education courses or programs, costs and payment policies, financial aid, and any other pertinent information. In the case of electronically-mediated distance education, institutions must provide information about the nature of faculty/student interaction, assumptions about students' technological competence and skills, technical equipment and software requirements, and availability of academic and student support services.
- d. The institution must ensure that students admitted possess the knowledge and equipment necessary to use the technology employed in the program and provide aid to students who are experiencing difficulty using the required technology.

## **6. Library and Learning Resources**

- a. The institution must ensure that students have access to and can effectively use appropriate library resources.
- b. The institution must monitor whether students make appropriate use of learning resources.
- c. The institution must provide laboratories, facilities, and equipment appropriate to the courses or programs.

## **7. Facilities and Finances**

- a. The institution must possess the equipment and technical expertise required for distance education.
- b. The institution's long-range planning, budgeting, and policy development processes must reflect the facilities, staffing, equipment and other resources essential to the viability and effectiveness of the distance education program.
- c. The facilities needed for distance delivery must be clearly identified and described and their use must be in compliance with legal requirement and BOG polices and regulations.

## **H. REVIEW CRITERIA**

In reviewing requests for authorization to initiate degree-related distance education programs, General Administration will consider:

1. The impact of the proposed program on the quality and capacity of existing on-campus academic programs at the requesting institution,
2. The need and demand for the distance education instruction,
3. The readiness of the institution to deliver a program comparable in quality and standards to those that are offered on-campus,
4. The impact of the proposed distance education instruction on other institutions or agencies in the area (if site-based) and in the state as a whole,
5. The compatibility of the proposed distance education activity with the mission and strategic plan of the requesting institution and with the mission and strategic directions of the University of North Carolina, and
6. The absence of unnecessary duplication of the proposed program with other face-to-face or distance programs.

## **I. ACCOUNTABILITY**

1. Degree-related courses or programs may be offered through distance education only with the concurrence of the responsible academic dean or department head of the college, school or department as to the adequacy of faculty and other instructional resources, such as library

resources, laboratory, computer and electronic resources, media support services, and classroom facilities, required for the proposed instructional activity.

2. The appropriate academic dean or department head will be accountable for all qualitative aspects of distance education operations and for ensuring the standards for awarding credit are consistent with requirements for credit that must be met by students enrolled in the program as on-campus students.
3. The appropriate academic dean or department head is responsible for ensuring that the teaching and evaluation formats for distance education instruction are comparable to the formats used on-campus or that the formats have been developed or revised specifically for distance education instruction.
4. Students enrolled in distance education courses and programs should be included in university-wide assessment programs administered to students on-campus (e.g., course/instructor evaluation, graduating senior and alumni surveys, etc.). All students should be included in the Student Data Files, and their courses should be reported on the Course Description Table Files, the Student Course Load Files, and the Course Grade Files provided to General Administration. The Office of Institutional Research on the campus should coordinate this data collection.
5. The institution must assess student capability to succeed in distance education programs and apply this information to admission and recruitment policies and decisions.
6. The institution must ensure the integrity of student work and the credibility of the degrees and credits it awards.

#### **J. REPORTING RESPONSIBILITIES**

1. The General Administration will maintain a current inventory of authorized degree-related distance education programs. This inventory will be posted and made available electronically.
2. Institutions will maintain an electronic listing of the degree-related distance education courses and programs currently being offered.
3. In January of each year, General Administration shall submit to SACS an annual report that includes an inventory of all authorized degree-related distance education programs for the University and highlights program additions, discontinuations, and other changes during the past year.

#### **K. PARTICIPATION OF CONSTITUENT INSTITUTIONS IN INTER-INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS**

1. Procedures for authorizing and offering degree-related distance education programs rely heavily on the initiative of constituent institutions to inform other constituent institutions of their plans, especially those in the locale where the proposed instructional activity will be carried out and where proposed courses and programs are comparable to those offered by neighboring institutions. Institutions are expected to exercise great care that their distance education instruction activities are not unproductive, excessively costly, or unnecessarily duplicative. Where appropriate, constituent institutions are encouraged to combine their efforts to serve citizens whose educational needs are not being met in a timely or effective manner.

2. General Administration must approve the participation of a constituent institution in any formal inter-institutional arrangements which provide for cooperative instructional activities and operation or use of facilities and academic resources between and among public and nonpublic institutions of higher education, including community colleges, public school systems, and any cooperative association of such educational institutions formed as a corporation or consortium, including "Consortium-Based Teacher Education Programs" authorized by the State Board of Education.

An institution proposing to participate in an inter-institutional arrangement as described above should follow the format in Appendix J to present its request prior to signing any agreement. General Administration will review and approve the terms and conditions of participation in any inter-institutional or interagency organization, including the charter and bylaws thereof, and may thereafter authorize a chief administrative officer of the constituent institution, or the officer's designee, a member of the President's staff, or any other person to participate on the governing body of such a consortium.

Certain inter-institutional arrangements (e.g., initiating credit courses involving a contractual agreement or consortium for course content to be delivered, in whole or in part, by an organization which is not accredited by the COC or, potentially, among COC-accredited institutions) may also require prior notification to the Commission on Colleges of SACS to assure that necessary accreditation requirements are met (Substantive Change Procedure Two). Once the arrangement has been approved, the institution should submit a copy of its proposal, accompanied by a copy of the letter of approval, to the Commission on Colleges. In instances where UNC institutions contract with community colleges to offer general education programs, both institutions should notify the Commission on Colleges to ensure that requirements are met.

Any commitments, including facilities and resources, by the University or a constituent institution to any inter-institutional arrangement, association or corporation shall be made in compliance with all provisions of law and regulations governing the University and the constituent institution and shall not exceed funds appropriated or otherwise lawfully available to the University or to the constituent institution thereof in the fiscal year in which the commitments are made.

The financial standing and operations of any inter-institutional arrangement, association or corporation shall be subject to audit by the State Auditor.