

Date: March 25, 2021

To: Chief Executive Officers, Accreditation Liaison Officers, and Peer Review Team Chairs of Colleges being reviewed in Fall 2021

From: Stephanie Droker, Ed.D.

Subject: Temporary Provision for Review of Distance Education Courses for Colleges Being Reviewed in Fall 2021

In an effort to provide direction to colleges and peer review teams concerning the review of Distance Education courses as part of a visit during fall 2021, ACCJC has developed the attached provisions for the review of Distance Education courses. Please note that these provisions only apply to Distance Education courses being reviewed as part of a visit during fall 2021.

In line with ACCJC's commitment to academic quality and continuous improvement, the review of Distance Education courses, as part of a fall 2021 visit, will follow ACCJC's existing distance education course review provisions, which are based on its current June 2011 *Policy on Distance Education and on Correspondence Education*, with one addition. Section 3. Consideration for Recommendations, now includes questions related to the effects of the pandemic that peer review teams should take into consideration as part of their deliberations concerning any recommendations. These questions will provide peer review teams a broader context of the college's planning efforts and current situation and inform the team's review of the college's alignment with federal regulations and Standards concerning distance education. The complete provisions are outlined in the attached document.

Should you have any questions about these provisions, please follow-up with your ACCJC staff liaison. Thank you for your ongoing commitment and service to academic quality and excellence.

Provision for review of Distance Education courses in response to COVID-19 pandemic for colleges being reviewed in Fall 2021

In line with ACCJC's commitment to academic quality and continuous improvement, the review of Distance Education courses, as part of a fall 2021 visit, will follow ACCJC's existing distance education course review provisions outlined below, which are based on its current June 2011 *Policy on Distance Education and on Correspondence Education*, with one addition. Section 3. Consideration for Recommendations, now includes questions related to the effects of the pandemic that peer review teams should take into consideration as part of their deliberations concerning any recommendations. These questions will provide peer review teams a broader context of the college's planning efforts and current situation and inform the team's review of the college's alignment with federal regulations and Standards concerning distance education.

1. Preparation for Comprehensive or Follow-up Peer Review Visit During Fall 2021

- The college should inform distance education faculty that the peer review team will "observe" a randomly selected cadre of distance education classes from the semester prior to the team visit.
- The college should work with the Team Chair to provide a random sample of fully online distance education courses to observe. This sample should constitute 5% (not to exceed a maximum of 50) of the total number of distance education sections that were offered during the semester immediately preceding the semester of the visit.
- The college will provide peer reviewers with access to archived distance education classes from the semester immediately preceding the semester of the visit, affording them the opportunity to observe "regular and substantive" interaction through a full semester, quarter, or shortened term. Review of archived classes also ensures that the reviewers' presence in the online class will not interfere with instruction or course design.
- The college should inform the peer review team of instructions for access to the randomly selected classes.
- In accordance with the Commission Policy on Public Disclosure and Confidentiality in the Accreditation Process, the college should expect that the peer review team will maintain confidentiality of student and instructor information.

2. Guidelines for Peer Reviewers

- The team chair will appoint one or two team members to observe distance education classes.
- Peer reviewers should conduct their review of the random selection of courses provided by the college as part of their review of the ISER and evidence prior to the visit.

- Peer reviewers should evaluate the courses using the institution’s own definitions and expectations for regular and substantive interaction.
- Considering the sensitive nature of such observations and acting in accordance with the Commission Policy on Public Disclosure and Confidentiality in the Accreditation Process, the peer reviewers will maintain confidentiality throughout the observations and report writing.
- Peer reviewers should triangulate their findings by confirming their observations through interviews with faculty and students who participate in distance education, and with managers or administrators who oversee distance education, and by using those interviews to uncover the root of deficiencies that they may have found in their observations.
- In keeping with federal policy §602.17(g), peer reviewers should be able to ensure that effective student verification processes are being employed; that student privacy is protected; and that, if there are any additional charges for these service, the college has written policies that students will be notified of such charges at the time of registration or enrollment.

3. Considerations for Recommendations

Determining if a recommendation is necessary, and the type of recommendation, compliance or improvement, should be based on the careful consideration of several factors. For example, if less than half of the distance education classes observed demonstrated evidence of regular and substantive interaction, the team should explore through its interviews with members of the college community, including faculty, students, and administrators, and review of all evidence, the issues pertaining to the low percentage, before deciding if a recommendation is necessary and the type of recommendation.

The team should also take into consideration the pandemic context in which many courses were transitioned to the distance education modality. Considering the following question will help the team understand how the college has responded to this transition, and their plans for ensuring all distance education courses meet the same academic and professional standards as courses taught in this modality prior to the pandemic.

- How did the college plan for transitioning courses into the distance education modality as a result of the pandemic, and what ongoing plans does the college have for sustaining this transition?
- What professional development has been made available to ensure faculty are aware of policies and procedures related to distance education including understanding of the college’s definition of regular and substantive interaction?
- What provisions does the college have in place to ensure all distance education courses meet academic and professional standards?
- How does the college validate that regular and substantive interaction, as per the college’s definition is being consistently implemented in all distance education courses?

- How has the college made available or expanded student support services to serve the needs of significantly greater distance education students?
- Of those courses transitioned to the distance education modality as a result of the pandemic, what percentage does the college anticipate will remain in this modality once the pandemic is over?

Understanding the broader context of the college's planning efforts and current situation regarding distance education courses will help the team carefully and thoughtfully document any challenges or issues in its findings, as well as write recommendations appropriate to the severity of the deficiencies.

In considering recommendations, the team will want to clearly identify the Standards in which the institution is deficient or needs to improve. Moreover, the team should ensure that in the discussion of the findings for those Standards, the deficiency in distance education is specifically identified in the team report.

In the final Team Report, the team must also ensure that its responses to the checklist questions pertaining to the *Policy on Distance Education and on Correspondence Education* are consistent with its findings and recommendations in the body of the report.