

This document was developed by the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC). The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) is a member of C-RAC. HLC provides these guidelines as a resource for its affiliated institutions and its Peer Review Corps.

Guidelines for the Evaluation of Distance Education (On-line Learning)

Introduction

The *Guidelines for the Evaluation of Distance Education (On-line Learning)* have been developed by the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC) to assist institutions in planning distance education and to provide an assessment framework for institutions already involved in distance education and for evaluation teams. They are based on a 2006 report prepared by the General Accounting Office, *Evidence of Quality in Distance Education drawn from Interviews with the Accreditation Community* and the “Best Practice Strategies to Promote Academic Integrity in Online Education,” prepared by WCET. They replace the 2001 Statement of Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs, and are intended to be used in conjunction with the relevant standards and policies of each accreditor.

The *Guidelines* comprise nine hallmarks of quality for distance education. In their discussions of how their distance education programming fulfills their accreditor’s standards, institutions are asked to include evidence of the extent to which they meet these hallmarks. Examples of the types of evidence that institutions might use are given below. These lists are not meant to be exhaustive; it is likely that institutions will include additional types of evidence in their reports.

Guidelines for the Evaluation of Distance Education (On-line Learning)

1. On-line learning is appropriate to the institution's mission and purposes.

Examples of evidence:

- a. The mission statement explains the role of on-line learning within the range of the institution's programs and services.
- b. Institutional and program statements of vision and values inform how the on-line learning environment(s) is created and supported.
- c. As appropriate, the institution incorporates into its on-line learning programs methods of meeting the stated institutional goals for the student experience at the institution.
- d. The recruitment and admissions programs supporting the on-line learning courses and programs appropriately target the student populations to be served.
- e. The students enrolled in the institution's on-line learning courses and programs fit the profile of the students the institution intends to serve.
- f. Senior administrators and staff can articulate how on-line learning is consonant with the institution's mission and goals.

2. The institution's plans for developing, sustaining and, if appropriate, expanding on-line learning offerings are integrated into its regular planning and evaluation processes.

Examples of evidence:

- a. Development and ownership of plans for on-line learning extend beyond the administrators directly responsible for it and the programs directly using it.
- b. Planning documents are explicit about any goals to increase numbers of programs provided through on-line learning courses and programs and/or numbers of students to be enrolled in them.
- c. Plans for on-line learning are linked effectively to budget and technology planning to ensure adequate support for current and future offerings.
- d. Plans for expanding on-line learning demonstrate the institution's capacity to assure an appropriate level of quality.
- e. The institution and its on-line learning programs have a track record of conducting needs analysis and of supporting programs.

3. On-line learning is incorporated into the institution's systems of governance and academic oversight.

Examples of evidence:

- a. The institution's faculty have a designated role in the design and implementation of its on-line learning offerings.
- b. The institution ensures the rigor of the offerings and the quality of the instruction.
- c. Approval of on-line learning courses and programs follows standard processes used in the college or university.

- d. On-line learning courses and programs are evaluated on a periodic basis.
- e. Contractual relationships and arrangements with consortial partners, if any, are clear and guarantee that the institution can exercise appropriate responsibility for the academic quality of all on-line learning offerings provided under its name.

4. Curricula for the institution's on-line learning offerings are coherent, cohesive, and comparable in academic rigor to programs offered in traditional instructional formats.

Examples of evidence:

- a. The curricular goals and course objectives show that the institution or program has knowledge of the best uses of on-line learning in different disciplines and settings.
- b. Curricula delivered through on-line learning are benchmarked against on-ground courses and programs, if provided by the institution, or those provided by traditional institutions.
- c. 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.
- d. Scheduling of on-line learning courses and programs provides students with a dependable pathway to ensure timely completion of degrees.
- e. The institution or program has established and enforces a policy on on-line learning course enrollments to ensure faculty capacity to work appropriately with students.
- f. Expectations for any required face-to-face, on-ground work (e.g., internships, specialized laboratory work) are stated clearly.
- g. Course design and delivery supports student-student and faculty-student interaction.
- h. Curriculum design and the course management system enable active faculty contribution to the learning environment.
- i. Course and program structures provide schedule and support known to be effective in helping on-line learning students persist and succeed.

5. The institution evaluates the effectiveness of its on-line learning offerings, including the extent to which the on-line learning goals are achieved, and uses the results of its evaluations to enhance the attainment of the goals.

Examples of evidence:

- a. Assessment of student learning follows processes used in onsite courses or programs and/or reflects good practice in assessment methods.
- b. Student course evaluations are routinely taken and an analysis of them contributes to strategies for course improvements.
- c. Evaluation strategies ensure effective communication between faculty members who design curriculum, faculty members who interact with students, and faculty members who evaluate student learning.
- d. The institution regularly evaluates the effectiveness of the academic and support services provided to students in on-line courses and uses the results for improvement.

- e. The institution demonstrates the appropriate use of technology to support its assessment strategies.
- f. The institution documents its success in implementing changes informed by its programs of assessment and evaluation.
- g. The institution provides examples of student work and student interactions among themselves and with faculty.
- h. The institution sets appropriate goals for the retention/persistence of students using on-line learning, assesses its achievement of these goals, and uses the results for improvement.

6. Faculty responsible for delivering the on-line learning curricula and evaluating the students' success in achieving the on-line learning goals are appropriately qualified and effectively supported.

Examples of evidence:

- a. On-line learning faculties are carefully selected, appropriately trained, frequently evaluated, and are marked by an acceptable level of turnover.
- b. The institution's training program for on-line learning faculty is periodic, incorporates tested good practices in on-line learning pedagogy, and ensures competency with the range of software products used by the institution.
- c. Faculty are proficient and effectively supported in using the course management system.
- d. The office or persons responsible for on-line 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.
- e. Faculty members engaged in on-line 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.
- f. Students express satisfaction with the quality of the instruction provided by on-line learning faculty members.

7. The institution provides effective student and academic services to support students enrolled in on-line learning offerings.

Examples of evidence:

- a. The institution's admissions program for on-line learning provides good web-based information to students about the nature of the on-line learning environment, and assists them in determining if they possess the skills important to success in on-line learning.
- b. The institution provides an on-line learning orientation program.
- c. The institution provides support services to students in formats appropriate to the delivery of the on-line learning program.
- d. Students in on-line learning programs have adequate access to student services, including financial aid, course registration, and career and placement counseling.
- e. Students in on-line learning programs have ready access to 24/7 tech support.

- f. Students using on-line learning have adequate access to learning resources, including library, information resources, laboratories, and equipment and tracking systems.
- g. Students using on-line learning demonstrate proficiency in the use of electronic forms of learning resources.
- h. Student complaint processes are clearly defined and can be used electronically.
- i. Publications and advertising for on-line learning programs are accurate and contain necessary information such as program goals, requirements, academic calendar, and faculty.
- j. Students are provided with reasonable and cost-effective ways to participate in the institution's system of student authentication.

8. The institution provides sufficient resources to support and, if appropriate, expand its on-line learning offerings

Examples of evidence:

- a. The institution prepares a multi-year budget for on-line 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.
- b. The institution provides evidence of a multi-year technology plan that addresses its goals for on-line learning and includes provision for a robust and scalable technical infrastructure.

9. The institution assures the integrity of its on-line learning offerings.¹

Examples of evidence:

- a. 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. **(Note: This is a federal requirement. All institutions that offer distance education programming must demonstrate compliance with this requirement.)**
- b. The institution's policies on academic integrity include explicit references to on-line learning.
- c. Issues of academic integrity are discussed during the orientation for on-line students.
- d. Training for faculty members engaged in on-line learning includes consideration of issues of academic integrity, including ways to reduce cheating.

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¹ Institutions are encouraged to consult "Best Practice Strategies to Promote Academic Integrity in Online Education," prepared by WCET and available at <http://www.wcet.info/2.0/>