



Call for Comment

Defining Distance Education

Considerations for Hybrid/Blended Programs

The use of distance education as a delivery modality for learning has expanded considerably in the last twenty-five years and so has the use of various terminologies. In the literature and news reports, terms such as computer-based learning, elearning, remote learning, correspondence education, distributed learning, blended or hybrid learning, online learning, hi-flex learning, mobile learning, and others have emerged. The Distance Education Accrediting Commission (DEAC) is issuing this white paper to provide guidance on how to implement distance education models that utilize the learning approaches expressed through these terms. The white paper is also intended to provide further guidance on eligibility requirements for institutions applying to DEAC for initial accreditation. It also supports DEAC-accredited member institutions that are developing new hybrid programs in preparation for a substantive change application. Lastly, the guidance in this white paper can support reaccreditation as the institution builds its record of compliance with DEAC standards and for review teams completing their evaluation of the institution's compliance with DEAC standards and procedures.

The Distance Education Accrediting Commission's standards, evaluation policies, and monitoring procedures are specifically designed to meet the unique quality assurance needs of distance education institutions. Further, the standards provide a framework for documenting the amount of academic engagement and preparation time needed to achieve the program learning outcomes. To support the growing field of distance education and to provide a contextual framework for the accreditation of this educational delivery methodology, DEAC utilizes the following definitions that are intended to provide clarity across all levels of educational institutions within DEAC membership for the purpose of distance education quality assurance.

Distance Education – the planned and systematic educational delivery approach where the learners are geographically separated from the instructor, and where interactive communication systems are used to regularly and substantively connect learners with instructional content, resources, and instructors either synchronously or asynchronously.

Academic Engagement – structured educational activities that are developed, led, or guided by qualified faculty where students learn, apply, or master content knowledge consistent with educational outcomes. Such examples may include (1) attending a synchronous class; (2) taking an assessment or exam; (3) participating in an interactive tutorial, webinar, or other interactive computer-assisted instruction, such as watching a recorded lecture; (4) participating in forums,

discussion boards, or chats with faculty and peers; (5) responding to faculty feedback; or (6) interacting directly with faculty regarding academic matters. These activities are documented as academic units of measurement in accordance with DEAC Standard III.F.

Academic Preparation – The students’ effort toward the completion of learning activities that contribute to achievement of the educational outcomes and that prepare for academic engagement. Such examples may include participation in a study group or group project; reading textbooks or articles; internet or library research; drafting online discussion responses; studying for an examination; writing a paper; or developing a project. These activities are documented as academic units of measurement in accordance with DEAC Standard III.F.

Based on DEAC requirements for institutional eligibility, 51 percent or more of the educational delivery needs to meet the above definition of distance education (Section III.A.5, Part Two, Processes and Procedures, DEAC *Accreditation Handbook*). In other words, 51 percent or more of the instructional delivery requires geographic distance between the instructor and learners. DEAC-accredited institutions must show that academic units of measurement at the course level fulfill the eligibility requirement that 51 percent or more of a degree, certificate, or other recognized educational credential offered by the institution is offered via distance education.

The United States Department of Education (USED) has also defined distance education in 34 CFR § 600.2 - Definitions.¹ DEAC-accredited institutions that participate in Title IV Student Federal Aid programs must fulfill DEAC requirements as well as those of USED.

Distance education: (1) Education that uses one or more of the technologies listed in paragraphs (2)(i) through (iv) of this definition to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor or instructors and to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor or instructors, either synchronously or asynchronously.

(2) The technologies that may be used to offer distance education include -

(i) The internet;

(ii) One-way and two-way transmissions through open broadcast, closed circuit, cable, microwave, broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite, or wireless communications devices;

(iii) Audio conference; or

(iv) Other media used in a course in conjunction with any of the technologies listed in paragraphs (2)(i) through (iii) of this definition.

(3) For purposes of this definition, an instructor is an individual responsible for delivering course content and who meets the qualifications for instruction established by an institution's accrediting agency.

¹ Higher Education Opportunity Act, Pub.L. 110-315, 122 Stat. 3078, codified as amended at 34 C.F.R. §600.2. See also 20 USC § 1003(7).

(4) *For purposes of this definition, substantive interaction is engaging students in teaching, learning, and assessment, consistent with the content under discussion, and also includes at least two of the following -*

(i) Providing direct instruction;

(ii) Assessing or providing feedback on a student's coursework;

(iii) Providing information or responding to questions about the content of a course or competency;

(iv) Facilitating a group discussion regarding the content of a course or competency; or

(v) Other instructional activities approved by the institution's or program's accrediting agency.

(5) *An institution ensures regular interaction between a student and an instructor or instructors by, prior to the student's completion of a course or competency -*

(i) Providing the opportunity for substantive interactions with the student on a predictable and scheduled basis commensurate with the length of time and the amount of content in the course or competency; and

(ii) Monitoring the student's academic engagement and success and ensuring that an instructor is responsible for promptly and proactively engaging in substantive interaction with the student when needed on the basis of such monitoring, or upon request by the student.

Note that these definitions are not limited to technology-enabled systems. A common misunderstanding is to indicate that distance education only entails online education. While the use of digital systems is the most common form of distributing distance education to learners, it is not the only means.

Adding to this delivery methodology is correspondence education, which includes the submission of assignments and/or scholarly conversations via phone, postal service, internet communication such as using document-sharing services, or email. This method of instruction occurs exclusively between the learner and the instructor. Interaction between instructors and students in a correspondence course is primarily initiated by the student.² Regular and substantive interaction between students and instructors is a key element that distinguishes distance education from correspondence education.

No matter the instructional method used to support distance education, the content to be instructed, or the student population engaging in the education, there are several key features that are important to support planned and systematic distance education. These are:

- interactive learning resources (which may include openly licensed content), software, simulations, websites, ebooks, or other resources that engage students in academic content;
- access to information resources, databases, and other primary source documents;
- the use of data and information to personalize learning and provide targeted supplementary instruction;

² Ibid.

- learning assessments based on established expectations;
- learning environments that allow for rich collaboration and communication, which may include student collaboration with content experts and peers; and
- a system in place to measure learning effectiveness and continuous quality improvement³

As evident in DEAC standards and the USED definitions, it is important to note that, while the type of distance education is important, the more significant issue is demonstrating that regularly recurring and substantial exchanges of information between learner and the instructor are taking place that meet expected learning outcomes.

Defining Blended or Hybrid Learning Delivery

The expanding use of blended or hybrid learning delivery throughout degree and non-degree educational offerings requires extra explanation. A blended learning approach is a combination of on-ground classroom experiences (residency) and a form of asynchronous distance education. In this educational process, integrated instructional approaches are used to support social and cognitive learning. It allows for direct instructor supervision in a scheduled, in-person, on-ground learning session, along with distance education instruction that allows students control over time, place, and pace of study.

DEAC has identified two contexts for how distance education is blended with in-residence instruction:

- Course level: The instructional academic engagement hours of a course (excluding student preparation time) are divided between on-ground (residency) and distance education. To meet DEAC standards, at least 51 percent of the academic engagement hours of a course need to be delivered via distance education modality. Academic preparation hours completed by students are not considered part of the equation when determining 51 percent distance education (see definitions above for clarity on what activities should be defined as academic engagement and academic preparation).
- Program level: There are several models of blended learning at the program level. In certain models, some courses within a program demonstrate academic engagement through in-residence instruction and other courses, through distance education format. Another program-level model might offer each course designed around a blended format as defined above. A third option could offer a combination of fully online courses, blended courses, and in-residence courses. In any of these cases, the program must clearly demonstrate that at least 51 percent of the total academic credits are delivered via distance education.

In demonstrating compliance with DEAC's institutional eligibility for accreditation, an educational institution utilizing blended learning as its delivery method needs to demonstrate that, in each program, 51 percent or more of its academic engagement is delivered by distance education. Using a blended learning delivery method requires an institution to provide the following:

³ Adapted from: *Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015* at www.ed.gov/essa

- A breakdown, by course, of the academic engagement and preparation hours;
- A methodology for determining the time devoted to each activity, which is employed both in curriculum development and in formulating the breakdown of contact hours; and
- Evidence that the methodology is regularly assessed and documented.

It is important for the institution to develop credit hour policies and procedures for measuring student time devoted to instructional activities because it is inappropriate to measure distance education instruction time by seat time as with credit/unit hour measurements.

Equally important is for DEAC to establish clear guidelines for institutions to follow when designing distance education program using a hybrid/blended learning model. This white paper aims to inspire more conversations and innovations on how best to address academic engagement within the context of hybrid/blended learning models. We invite you to reach out to DEAC and join this conversation!

Please provide any written comments on or before **Tuesday, June 7, 2022** using the Call for Comment form [linked here](#) and available [on the DEAC website](#). The Commission will review all such comments at its June 2022 meeting.