6.35 Distance Education

Last Revised: June 2021

Policy: Piedmont Community College (PCC) is committed to similar success for students in Distance Education (DE) courses and programs as for traditional face-to-face students. To this end, the College recommends best practices for the delivery of DE and compliance with all applicable requirements and standards of the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC).

This policy should be revisited and revised (as needed) annually because of the rapidity of change in the field.

Purpose/Definitions:

Purpose

The PCC Distance Education Policy provides guidelines regarding student learning via DE. With an effective policy, students will be provided the knowledge needed to achieve their professional and career goals in a student-centered learning environment. It is not the intent of this policy to supplant any existing policies set forth by the College, but where necessary, to define new or to expand existing policies and procedures to ensure the most effective implementation and support of DE courses and programs.

Consistent with the College's mission to provide education for lifelong learning and professional success in local, regional, and global communities, PCC recognizes that new approaches to instruction must meet the same high-quality standards that exist for traditional classroom-bound education. The College recognizes the advantages of providing learning opportunities that are not restricted by time, place, or method of delivery. In an effort to meet and ensure that these standards exist in DE at the College, the purpose of this document is three-fold:

1. To provide a faculty guide for developing and implementing DE;
2. To communicate quality standards for the delivery and assessment of DE at PCC; and
3. To place emphasis on the importance of student support for DE students and the services necessary for student success.

Definitions

Blended—blended courses are designed and facilitated so that 51% or more of the experience is face-to-face. Blended courses combine synchronous classroom instruction with computer-based, online learning.

Distance Education (DE)—an approach to learning where instruction takes place outside the traditional classroom setting. Instructors use electronic or a blend of face-to-face and electronic delivery methods to develop and furnish content for instruction and interaction with students.

Hybrid— Hybrid courses are designed and facilitated so that 51% or more of the experience is online. Hybrids combine synchronous classroom instruction with computer-based, online learning.

Interactive Television (ITV)—delivered through an ITV system which integrates two or more classrooms at distant locations to create one virtual classroom. Students communicate with each other and the instructor in a fully interactive, real-time classroom through TV monitors, video cameras, microphone, and/or supplemental technology. These courses are offered at both PCC campus locations. Faculty may utilize online or proctored testing.

Online (WEB-Asynchronous)—delivered using the Internet through Blackboard management system, no face-to-face instruction and, when applicable, labs are conducted online and may include multimedia components such as audio and video files. These courses are developed by either faculty from PCC or through the NCCCS Virtual Learning Community (VLC).

Quality Matters—an international, inter-institutional program that uses a set of approved rubrics to evaluate the quality of Online Courses.

Approval Authority/Monitoring Authority: Piedmont Community College's Board of Trustees has approval authority for this policy. The Vice President, Instruction has monitoring authority for this policy.

Procedure:

Section 1:   Quality Expectations

    1.1.   Distance learning conducted at PCC will comply with the "Benchmarks for Success in Internet-based Distance Learning" as presented by The Institute for Higher Education Policy, and in accordance with the "Guidelines in the Application of the Principles of Accreditation" provided by SACSCOC.

1.2.   DE courses shall meet at least the same quality standards applicable to on-campus instruction as well as quality standards specifically applicable to distance learning instruction.

1.3.   For degree-seeking students, the same policies concerning admissions requirements, scholastic standards, and other administrative processes apply to distance learning programs as they do for on-campus programs.

1.4.   All distance learning courses will be monitored and evaluated on a regular basis by Dean, Learning Commons (or designee) and evaluation results will be used for continuous program improvement. This should follow procedures similar to those in effect for face-to-face courses.

1.5.   PCC utilizes the Quality Matters rubric as a guideline for course development and delivery. Based on national standards of best practice, research, and instructional design principles, Quality Matters (QM) is a faculty-centered review process that is designed to certify the quality of online and blended online/face-to-face courses.

Section 2:   Requirements and Expectations for Distance Education Faculty

2.1.   As with traditional courses, PCC's faculty shall assume primary responsibility for and exercise oversight over DE instruction, ensuring both the rigor of courses, curriculum, and the quality of instruction. With noted differences between teaching DE courses and teaching courses using "traditional" methodologies, the decision to use distance learning will be made on a course-by-course basis, with consideration given to the content of the course, the needs of the learners, and the flexibility of the delivery mechanism.

2.2.   Faculty should respond to email correspondence from students within a 24-hour period during the work week (i.e., Monday-Friday, excluding holidays).

2.2.1.   Preferred methods of communication should be listed in the syllabus.

2.3.   Faculty should exhibit due diligence in monitoring student progress and make efforts to contact and engage students who are exhibiting difficulties in the course.

2.4.   Instructional design should reflect best practice quality standards and provide for a consistent environment and learning experience for students.

2.4.1.   Faculty should strive to meet the diverse needs of students and ensure active learning in DE coursework by incorporating a variety of course experiences that address diverse learning styles.

Section 3:   Faculty Qualifications

3.1.   All faculty requesting to teach a 100% online or hybrid course shall be required to demonstrate competence in online instruction.

    3.1.1.   Instructors must have appropriate SACSCOC credentials to teach an online or hybrid course.

    3.1.2.   Online and hybrid courses count the same as traditional courses in determining teaching loads.

    3.1.3.   Instructors new to distance learning will complete the Basic Blackboard course before the first day of class.

3.2.   In addition, instructional deans should consider other factors such as the following in determining whether a faculty member is qualified to teach an online, hybrid, or blended online/face-to-face course:

    3.2.1.   Prior annual evaluations of teaching

    3.2.2.   Other faculty development or training in teaching online

    3.2.3.   Skills associated with teaching online (e.g., basic computer skills, database management, file management, word-processing, presentation software, e-mail, internet, social networking, learning management systems).

Section 4:   Census Data

4.1.   To continue in an online course, students are required to complete an assignment on or before the census (10%) point of the semester.

    4.1.1.   It is recommended that faculty give students several opportunities before the census date to complete an assignment, which may include an icebreaker discussion forum, syllabus quiz, enrollment verification forum, or a gradable assignment.

    4.1.2.   Faculty can verify the assignment was completed by providing either a printout or a screenshot of the assignment which captures the date in which the assignment was completed.

4.2.   For hybrid classes, the instructor will enter an "E" in the student portal for either the online **or** the face-to-face portion, depending on whether the student first attended a face-to-face class or completed an assignment online.

4.2.1. If the student first completed an assignment online, documentation of that assignment should be sent to the registrar.

Section 5:   Training

5.1.   For online DE courses, the DE staff will provide training regarding course design and implementation.

5.1.1.   Training will be available online, in onsite workshops, and through individual consultations in a format that prepares faculty to develop courses that are in accordance with Quality Matters.

5.1.2.   Additional training will be required of faculty if policy, procedures, and/or requirements change.

5.2.   For ITV courses, DE staff will provide information on any technical requirements and guidance on providing effective televised presentations.

Section 6:   Approval Process for Distance Delivery

6.1.   To encourage high quality course offerings, proposals for creating new DE courses and proposals for converting existing courses to a distance format will be given careful review.

6.2.   Not only must DE courses meet the same quality standards as traditional face-to-face courses, but additional review is necessary to ensure the appropriateness and feasibility of the chosen e-learning medium.

6.3.   DE courses should be approved in the semester prior to the semester of delivery, to allow for sufficient course development.

6.4.   The process for developing a DE course is outlined below:

6.4.1.   All online and hybrid courses must utilize the standard course delivery system adopted by the College (Blackboard).

6.4.2.   Each course must include course elements consistent with the expectations and regulations of the College and with SACSCOC requirements.

6.4.3.   To propose a course that has never been offered via your chosen DE modality— online, hybrid, web-enhanced, or teleweb—complete the Course Development Proposal.

6.4.4.   All DE course developers must adhere to the following deadlines.

6.4.4.1. The due dates for the complete proposal to reach Dean, Learning Commons.

6.4.4.1.1. If the course is to be taught spring semester of the next year, the proposal must be received by the end of May in the current year.

6.4.4.1.2. If the course is to be taught summer semester of the next year, the proposal must be received by the end of November in the current year.

6.4.4.1.3. If the course is to be taught fall semester of the next year, the proposal must be received by the end of November in the current year.

6.4.5. The completed proposal form is submitted via email attachment or campus mail to the appropriate instructional dean.

6.4.5.1. If approved by the instructional dean, the proposal is forwarded to DE staff.

6.4.5.2. A Curriculum Committee Action Request form is completed, and the Course Development Proposal package is presented by the instructional dean to the Curriculum Committee for approval.

6.4.5.3. Once approved, the form is returned with signatures to DE staff.

6.4.5.4. The course developer is then notified, and a course development template shell is created in Blackboard.

6.4.6. Payment to the course developer is not made until a course is developed in its entirety, meets Quality Matters standards, and receives approval from the Dean, Learning Commons.

6.4.7. Course Development cannot begin until approval for development is obtained from the Curriculum Committee.

Section 7:   Course Design

7.1. Faculty will work with the DE staff to design an online course that reflects the components of Quality Matters.

7.2. To provide a consistent online experience for the student, faculty shall follow the College's Learning Management System (LMS) template for online course layout.

7.3.   Courses designed for DE delivery must reflect contact hours and instructional time commitments in accordance with PCC's expected student learning outcomes that are equivalent to those for the same courses delivered through traditional formats.

Section 8:   The Syllabus

8.1.   The course syllabus must use the accessible syllabus template provided along with the following components:

8.1.1.   Instructor's virtual office hours

8.1.2.   Technological requirements for the course including any special software requirements

8.1.3.   Procedure for resolving technical complaints including contact information for technical support

8.1.4.   Preferred method for contacting instructor, e.g. email, phone, text message

8.1.5.   Netiquette expectations

8.1.6.   Instructor's response time for student communications [Faculty engaged in 100% online courses are required to maintain a 24-hour maximum response time (excluding weekends, holidays, or extenuating circumstances) for returning student emails.]

8.1.7.   Procedure for determining attendance

8.1.8.   Student participation/interaction requirements

Section 9:   Online Course Design Practices for Accessibility

9.1.   Course Web Site Design Guidelines

9.1.1.   Online course sites will be inclusively developed and maintained in conformance with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) – Version 2.1.

9.1.2.   The WCAG 2.1 was published June 2018 by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), an international community of experts that work together to develop Web standards.

9.1.3.　The WCAG 2.1 guidelines are based on the principles that content and controls should be perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust enough to function with a variety of assistive technologies.

9.1.4.　Each principle includes one or more guidelines for practice.

9.1.4.1.　For a complete explanation of how to conform to WCAG 2.1, please consult "How to Meet WCAG 2.1 (Quick Reference)" on the W3C Web Accessibility Initiative Web site.

9.1.4.2.　For an introduction to the guidelines, refer to the W3C's Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) Overview.

9.1.5.　Courses that are in the path of current students who are known to have disabilities will be given priority for being brought up to standard.

9.2.　Supplemental Web Sites

9.2.1.　When links to external Web sites are provided to students within an online course, the portion of those external sites intended for student viewing should be reviewed for conformance with the guidelines listed above.

Section 10:　Course Assessment

10.1.　It is common practice for administrators to visit face-to-face classes each semester to offer support to instructors as well as to observe students in class settings and to stay connected to the actual practice of instruction.

10.2.　Instructional administrators also have the responsibility to ensure that classes are meeting as posted in the schedule of classes and that the instructor is providing the instruction agreed upon as contracted.

10.3.　When an administrator visits a face-to-face class in session, the instructor, if possible, has been notified ahead of time, is present in the room, and aware of the visitation.

10.3.1.　It is appropriate to assume that the same situation should exist during visitations in the virtual classroom.

10.4.　Visitation of online courses will occur by the Dean, Learning Commons (or designee).

10.5.　Visitation of online courses by administrators may occur for the purposes listed below.

10.5.1. To ensure that the course is appropriately available to students in the learning management system.

10.5.2. To ensure that regular effective contact is taking place.

10.5.3. In response to a request from the instructor in the course. (e.g., questionable student conduct, technical problems, course development review, and recommendation, etc.)

10.5.4. In response to student complaints about the instructor, the course, or the course management system infrastructure.

10.5.5. To conduct an official course evaluation.

10.6. For supervisor observation, access to a course will be provided by the LMS administrator.

Section 11:   Course Load, Compensation, Ownership of Materials, and Copyright

11.1. Distance learning courses are typically part of the faculty member's regular teaching load, with the same rate of compensation as traditional courses.

11.2. Distance learning courses may also be taught as an overload, at the same rate of compensation as traditional courses taught as an overload.

11.3. Any exceptions (e.g., reassigned time for developing courses using new distance technologies) are reviewed on a case-by-case basis, and as per current procedure, must be approved by the instructional dean and Vice President, Instruction.

11.4. Faculty who develop online and hybrid courses share ownership with the College.

11.4.1. The instructor has ownership of the course and if the faculty member leaves employment with the College, PCC shall retain the right to continue using the course.

11.5. Faculty must keep in mind copyright, trademark, and licensing issues when designing DE courses and therefore should be familiar with PCC's Copyright and Fair Use Policy (Policy 2.16).

11.5.1. Examples include the use of copyrighted photographs, graphics, text selections, audio clips from a song, or video clips from a movie.

11.5.2. As PCC's policy states, the usual permissions must be acquired and documented by the faculty member.

11.5.3. When in doubt about copyright ownership, it is preferable to be overly cautious.

11.5.4. If copyright permission cannot be obtained or if ownership is questionable, faculty should substitute other resources where copyright permission is clear and obtainable, or substitute resources that are in the public domain.

Section 12:   Distance Education Student Orientation Course

12.1.   The institution provides orientation opportunities and resources for distance learners that are appropriate to the technologies used, the content, and the learners.

12.2.   The final step in the student online orientation process is an assessment.

12.2.1. This assessment will contain questions that cover important aspects of student readiness to enroll in online courses.

12.2.2. It will also assess students' knowledge of Blackboard, the online learning management system used by PCC.

12.2.3. A score of 80 or higher is required to pass the assessment.

12.2.4. Students with a score of less than 80 will be instructed to review the orientation materials and retake the assessment.

12.3.   Students who are unsuccessful in passing the assessment and still desire to take online courses should attend a face-to-face orientation training session offered each term by PCC's DE staff.

Section 13:   Student Authentication

13.1.   PCC uses the SACSCOC-suggested secure login and pass code student identification method as an attempt to ensure that the student who registers in a DE course or program is the same student who participates in and completes the course or program and receives the associated credit for the course or program.

13.1.1. At the time of enrollment, students receive a unique username (secure login) and password (secure pass code).

13.1.2. The username and password are used for student identification/authentication purposes for DE course work at no extra cost to the student, with both the username and password used for work submitted online.

13.2.   The College has systems in place that ensure the users seeking assistance provide identifying documents, such as but not limited to, student ID number, date of birth, or e-mail address verifying their identity before troubleshooting. This practice ensures that only the actual student of record is given access to the course content.

13.2.1.   In addition to the secure username and password method, faculty may use proctored exams to authenticate the work of distance education students. PCC uses a tool which locks down a student's browser while they take a test and has a video monitoring option. PCC Nursing faculty use ExamSoft, an online proctoring tool.

13.3.   If a faculty member chooses to use additional means of authenticating the work of DE students, students must be informed in writing at the time of course registration of any actual and/or projected associated obligations.

Section 14:   Student Support

14.1.   The instructional deans will be responsible for ensuring that all distance learning program materials clearly and accurately represent the program, including detailed program completion requirements, along with programs and faculty responsibilities.

14.2.   In the case of hybrid courses, information regarding the percentage of the course to be done at a distance and the nature of that experience will be provided to students during course registration and will accurately represent the expectations.

14.3.   Instructors will be responsible for ensuring that all distance learning program/course materials clearly and accurately define any specific student background, knowledge, or technical skills needed to undertake and successfully complete the distance learning course(s) and describe in layman's terms any course-specific technical equipment and/or software required or recommended.

14.4.   PCC students enrolled in distance learning will have access to academic support, library services, advising, course registration, and financial aid assistance appropriate for distance learning students.

14.4.1.   Technology assistance is available through the distance learning helpdesk.

14.4.2.   Students may obtain academic advising and other support services by videoconference, phone, e-mail, or in-person.

14.4.3.   Program materials will clearly describe how students obtain these support services.

14.5. The institution will provide adequate library and information resources, services, and support for academic programs, including training in information literacy.

   14.5.1. Personal assistance will be available from the librarians and staff via chat, email, and telephone.

Section 15:   Student Privacy

15.1. Student privacy in all courses and programs regardless of delivery format is protected as per the Policies and Procedures Relating to the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (PCC Policy 7.6).

15.2. PCC must protect the security, confidentiality, and integrity of the records related to students enrolled in DE courses and programs.

15.3. The College maintains security measures to protect and back up student records.

15.4. The privacy of students in DE courses and programs must always be secure from public access or unauthorized College employees.

Legal Citation: 1B SBCCC 100.1; 1G SBCCC 200.93

History: Approved April 2017; Revised June 2021—Cross-references PCC Policy 2.16 Copyright and Fair Use and Policy 7.6 The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974