

Distance Education

Category: *Academic Affairs*

Policy Number: 2802

Policy Manager: *Office of Distance Education*

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PURPOSE

This policy defines the framework to develop, deliver, support, and coordinate distance and/or correspondence education programs and courses at the University.

TARGET AUDIENCE

This policy applies to faculty, students, administrators, staff and contracted employees.

AUTHORITY

The University's Board of Visitors delegates administrative authority to the University president who may delegate authority to other University employees.

The University's Provost, through presidential delegated authority, shall oversee all matters pertaining to the operation and execution of Virginia State University's distance education program and adherence to this policy.

DEFINITIONS

Asynchronous Online Course: A course format that provides required contact hours for the course 100% asynchronously online. Students and the instructor have not synchronous contact during class time. Students in the course are not required to be on campus or in live-streamed lecture or event with the instructor.

Correspondence Education: A formal educational process under which the institution provides instructional materials, by mail or electronic transmission, including examinations on the materials, to students who are separated from the instructor. Interaction between the instructor and the student is limited, is not regular and substantive, and is primarily initiated by the student; courses are typically self-paced.

Course Shell: A university-approved template for all asynchronous and synchronous online, blended/hybrid, web- or technology-enhanced, and face-to-face courses with common components, criteria, and guidelines that faculty can augment with their needs and requirements.

Distance Education: A formal educational process in which the majority of the instruction (interaction between students and instructors and among students) in a course occurs when students and instructors are not in the same place. Instruction may be synchronous or asynchronous. A distance education course may use the internet; one-way and two-way transmissions through open broadcast, closed circuit, cable, microwave, broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite, or wireless communications devices; audio conferencing; or other digital media if used as part of the distance education course or program



Hybrid Course: A course format that delivers the required contact hours in a combination of face-to-face and distance education.

Hybrid Program: A program for which 50% or more of the required credit hours are delivered at a distance. The hybrid program can include a combination of online, hybrid, and face-to-face courses. According to the SCHEV academic program approval policy, the program must include both online and face-to-face delivery formats and at least one delivery format is required and cannot be substituted or changed for another delivery format.

Online Course: A course format that delivers the required contact hours using distance education with students and instructors in different locations. Instruction may be synchronous or asynchronous, using the internet and the learning management system.

Online Program: A program for which 100% of the required credit hours are delivered at a distance. All required credit hours must be available in the distance format so that students can complete the program entirely online. The institution cannot force a student to complete a face-to-face course for a program approved for distance delivery as the student may be unable to attend class due to geographic limitations. Programs can require students to complete site-based placements for internships, practicums, cooperatives, and clinical placements. These requirements are made available to students before committing to the VSU Online degree program.

SACSCOC: Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges; the body for accreditation of degree-granting higher education institutions in the southern states.

Synchronous Online Course: A course format that provides required contact hours for the course with at least one required scheduled online synchronous session. The instruction and learning follow a defined schedule. The dates, times, and links for required synchronous online sessions are available to students at the time of registration to ensure students know the commitment before registering for the course. Students in these courses are not required to be on campus.

University: Virginia State University or VSU

POLICY STATEMENT

VSU Online provides support to the distance and online education program offerings at Virginia State University. This includes providing policies, standards, guidance, and support for the instructional development and delivery of instruction using learning management systems, learning tools, video, and web conferencing systems. Each online degree program is supported through its respective academic college and/or school. The University's academic review of

distance and/or correspondence education programs is comparable to campus-based programs, including assessments of student learning outcomes, student retention, and student satisfaction. All faculty teaching online must be certified through the University's certification process. VSU Online assists the academic units with maintaining and providing quality course offerings that have been benchmarked with the nationally recognized Quality Matters online course quality standards.

The offering of distance education programs and courses will be in alignment with the University's mission, the 21st Century Distance Education Guidelines, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges' (SACSCOC), *Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement*, and will apply to all academic programs, regardless of delivery modality. All distance and correspondence education programs and courses will adhere to the University's published academic policies and procedures and the SACSCOC's Guidelines for the Evaluation of Distance Education (Online Learning). The University will ensure all distance and correspondence education programs have appropriate support services and resources. The University will use the following guidelines in implementing and reporting on distance and correspondence education programs:

Curriculum and Instruction

The academic content and requirements for distance and correspondence education programs and courses will be equivalent to the academic content and requirements for campus-based programs and courses. The Office of Distance Education works with the faculty to ensure both the rigor and quality of distance education and correspondence courses.

For all degree programs offered through distance education or correspondence courses, the program length will be appropriate for each of the educational programs and will embody a coherent course of study that is compatible with the institution's mission and is based upon fields of study appropriate to higher education. Additionally, the University will ensure it reports accurate distance education headcount enrollment and agrees to professional licensure disclosures as required by 34 §C.F.R. 668.43.

Regular and Substantive Interaction (RSI)

Effective online instructors engage in regular and substantive interaction (RSI) with students to promote instructor presence and student engagement in the online classroom. Prior to the student's completion of a course or competency, the University ensures regular interaction between a student and an instructor or instructors by:

- 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

- 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.

Regular and substantive interactions must:

- be with an instructor as defined by the University's accreditor;
- be initiated by the instructor;
- be scheduled and predictable;
- be academic in nature and relevant to the course; and
- include at least two of the following:
 - direct instruction,
 - coursework assessment or feedback,
 - group discussion of the course content, or
 - other instructional methods approved by the University's accreditor

Attendance

Documenting that a student has logged into a distance education course is not sufficient, by itself to demonstrate academic attendance by a student. The student must participate in class or be otherwise engaged in an academically related activity. Examples of acceptable evidence of academic attendance and attendance at an academically related activity in a distance education program include, but are not limited to the following:

- student submission of an academic assignment,
- student submission of an exam,
- documented student participation in an interactive tutorial or computer-assisted instruction,
- a posting by the student showing the student's participation in an online study group that is assigned by the institution,
- a posting by the student in a discussion forum showing the student's participation in an online discussion about academic matters

As part of exemplary course design, and by using the online course template, all VSU faculty are able to include regular substantive interactions and activities for attendance taking early and often in all online course.

Faculty

As with campus-based programs and courses, faculty assigned to develop, design, and teach distance and/or correspondence education courses will be equally qualified; and the criteria for



the evaluation of faculty teaching distance and/or correspondence education courses will be similar. The academic unit is responsible for ensuring faculty are qualified to teach distance and/or correspondence education courses.

Prior to being assigned to teach a distance and/or correspondence education course, the academic unit will verify the faculty member's eligibility. Faculty teaching distance and/or correspondence education courses will be required to demonstrate proficiency in computer usage; online content development, delivery and course management; pedagogical uses of specific instructional technologies; online course readiness and design; strategies for developing online student engagement and faculty-to-learner, learner-to-learner, and learner-to-content interactions; and the requirements for incorporating accessibility technologies in an alternative delivery format.

Proficiency in teaching distance and/or correspondence education will be demonstrated by a faculty member's successful completion of the VSU Online Faculty Certification Program. Faculty who can document the completion of an online teaching certification program from another accredited university/college or national agency/organization and provide evidence of extensive successful online teaching experience may be approved to teach.

Policies for faculty evaluation include appropriate recognition of teaching, service, and scholarly or creative activities related to distance and/or correspondence education programs or courses.

Institutional Effectiveness

The University's academic review of distance and/or correspondence education programs will be comparable to campus-based programs, including assessments of student learning outcomes, student retention, and student satisfaction. The Office of Planning and Institutional Effectiveness will collaborate with the Division of Digital Learning and Extended Studies and the academic units to regularly assess learning, course quality, instructional quality and program quality. The Office of Planning and Institutional Effectiveness will develop an instrument to be used by students to assess course and instructional quality. VSU Online is primarily responsible for regularly evaluating all distance education courses using Quality Matters national standards, best practices, and instructional design principles. The Office of Planning and Institutional Effectiveness, the Division of Digital Learning and Extended Studies, and the academic units will collaborate to review the online degree programs using the Online Learning Consortium's Program Evaluation Rubric or another nationally recognized organization rubric.

Library and Learning Resources

Equivalent library and learning resources will be available to students enrolled in distance and/or correspondence programs and courses. As with campus-based programs and courses, the requirements of the various academic programs will determine the requisite library and learning resources. Elements of library support and learning resources will include, but not be limited to, electronic document delivery, electronic journals, full-text databases, end-user searching, reference assistance and instruction, network access, reciprocal borrowing and interlibrary loan services, cooperative arrangements with other libraries for collection access, cooperative development of databases, and other strategies that emphasize access to resources.

Student Services

Students enrolled in distance education courses will have adequate access to the range of appropriate academic and student support services. These include admission, orientation, course registration, academic advising, complaint resolution, textbook acquisition, financial aid, career development, and other special program accommodations, as applicable. Additionally, personal information will be protected. The University protects the privacy of all students, including distance education students, through the strict adherence to the rules of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) (20 U.S.C. § 1232g; 34 CFR Part 99)

An array of techniques will be used to protect distance and/or correspondence education students' privacy and identity. These include secure login and password, proctored examinations (supervised face-to-face, electronic, and/or online services), and authentic assessments.

Facilities and Finances

Appropriate technical expertise and technological infrastructure will be available to meet the needs of students enrolled in distance and/or correspondence education programs and courses.

Education and Compliance

New (full-time and part-time/ adjunct) faculty will be required to complete the Faculty Online Certification Program prior to teaching a distance education course. All faculty teaching distance education courses will complete annual training in best practices in online learning pedagogy and the range of software products used by the University.

All distance education courses will be reviewed using the best practices and accepted national standards as outlined by Quality Matters (QM) and will be conducted periodically according to the published schedule outlined by the Office of Distance Education. The Quality Matters

standards ensure the online components of courses promote learner engagement and provide students with the tools and information needed to be successful learners. The quality assurance process addresses the following standards in the Quality Matters Higher Education Rubric:

1. Course Overview and Introduction
2. Learning Objectives (Competencies)
3. Assessment and Measurement
4. Instructional Materials
5. Learning Activities and Learner Interaction
6. Course Technology
7. Learner Support
8. Accessibility and Usability

Virginia State University prioritizes equal access for all students in its distance education programs. The policy adheres to disability rights laws and provides accessible materials, effective communication, and reasonable accommodations. Students with disabilities are encouraged to contact the Office of Disability Services for personalized support. The Student Accessibility Office (SAO) provides services to students who meet program guidelines. To become eligible for services, documentation of the disability from a qualified professional must be provided upon request. <https://www.vsu.edu/student-life/support-and-resources/students-with-disabilities/>

RELATED PROCEDURES

RELATED MATERIALS/REFERENCES

VSU Online Guidelines and Protocols

VSU Online Student Handbook

State Council of Higher Education Virginia (SCHEV) <https://www.schev.edu>

SACSCOC Distance and Correspondence Education Policy Statement, Revised and Edited (SACSCOC Board of Trustees, September 2020)

APPROVED BY:



President



Date

REVISION HISTORY

This policy supersedes the following archived policies: