

University of Wisconsin System
Guidelines for Distance Education Degree Program Approval
(pending Board approval)
September 2, 2011

For the purposes of this policy, distance education is defined as follows: Distance education is a planned teaching/learning experience in which teacher and students are separated by physical distance.* In distance education courses and programs, student-teacher interactions occur and course materials are delivered in either an asynchronous or synchronous mode over a wide spectrum of existing and evolving media. A distance education degree program is one in which fifty percent or more of the credit hours can be earned through distance education courses.

Guidelines for UW System Distance Education approval operate in tandem with Regent Policy ACIS-1.0 *Academic Planning and Program Review* and with the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) policies and requirements concerning distance or correspondence education. Because HLC now has a process to approve distance education at the institutional level, UW System will rely upon the HLC approval process to ensure institutions have appropriate policies, processes and facilities in place to provide distance delivery programs. UW System will only require copies of the institutional application and the subsequent approval letter from HLC demonstrating that the institution is accredited to provide distance education. However, System Administration and Board of Regents approval is necessary to establish new degree programs, regardless of the mode of delivery.

I. HLC Institutional Accreditation to offer Distance Education

- A. HLC policy requires an institution to seek the Commission's prior approval if the institution plans to initiate or expand its distance-delivered offerings. When initiation or expansion is anticipated, an institution must submit the HLC form: *Substantive Change Application: Distance Delivery* (found at <http://ncahlc.org/>. Search "documents" for "Distance Delivery Ap"). HLC approval is required at three threshold points or percentage brackets for distance delivered offerings:
1. When distance delivered offerings are initiated (but comprise less than 5% of total degree programs);
 2. when distance delivered offerings comprise at least 5% but less than 20% of total degree programs; and
 3. when distance delivered offerings comprise 20% or more of total degree programs.
- B. Copies of distance delivery applications to HLC should also be sent to the Associate Vice President for Academic and Faculty Programs at UW System Administration.
- C. Copies of the HLC approval for distance delivery should also be sent to the Associate Vice President for Academic and Faculty Programs at UW System Administration.

* See also HLC definition in *Overview of Commission Policies and Procedures for Institutional Changes Requiring Commission Notification or Approval*, p. 6 Version 1.3, January 2011 found at <http://ncahlc.org/>. Search "documents" for "Change Overview".

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II. Procedures for Approval of New Distance Education Programs

- A. Institutions must seek HLC approval (and notify UW System Administration) if the institution plans to initiate or expand its distance-delivered offerings, as explained in I.A-C above.
- B. New distance education programs will go through the same process as any other new academic program.
- C. Institutions requesting Entitlement to Plan or Authorization to Implement for a new degree program that will have a distance education option (or be offered solely via distance delivery) should note that in the request.
- D. When applicable, the request for Entitlement to Plan should demonstrate collaboration with other UW institutions to make use of already existing online/distance education courses and faculty expertise.
- E. As part of the standard program approval process, the request will be circulated to all UW System institutions for feedback and review.
- F. The Executive Summary submitted to the Board of Regents should address the required information (see Regent Policy ACIS 1.0 [Academic Planning and Program Review](#) and current [Guidelines](#) at <http://www.wisconsin.edu/acss/planning/>) within the context of distance delivery.
- G. The budget overview and narrative should describe financing through cost recovery or other common cost methodologies in accord with [UW System Distance Education Pricing Principles](#) (<http://www.wisconsin.edu/acss/planning/depricing.htm>). (UW System Distance Education Pricing Principles are currently under review.)
- H. Institutions are responsible for ensuring that the new program meets all applicable federal, state, and HLC accreditation requirements regarding online or distance programs.
- I. Institutions are responsible for meeting any State requirements for it to be legally offering postsecondary distance or correspondence education to students who are residents of that State.
- J. Institutions are required to provide all prospective and current students with the contact information of the state agency or agencies that handle complaints against postsecondary education institutions offering distance learning or correspondence education within that state.

III. Procedures for Expanding a Previously Authorized Program to Distance Education Delivery

- A. Institutions must seek HLC approval (and notify UW System Administration) if the institution plans to initiate or expand its distance-delivered offerings, as explained in I.A-C above.
- B. A degree program that has previously been authorized by the Board of Regents for on-campus delivery needs no further approval by UW System Administration to be expanded to provide this same program by distance education if it is essentially

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identical to the previously authorized program and does not include changes in degree requirements, credits, or curriculum, etc. If the distance education degree is substantially different or appears under a new or changed name, standard approval for a new academic degree program (following ACIS-1.0) by UW System Administration and the Board of Regents will be required.

- C. Institutions should notify the Associate Vice President for Academic and Faculty Programs at afgp@uwsa.edu of any programs expanded to distance delivery within one month of implementation.

NOTE: These Guidelines replace the following outdated documents:

- *Submitting Requests to Offer Existing Degree Programs by Distance Education*, Revised Instructions, July 2003
- Regent Policy Document 15-2 *Distance Education Standards*:
Distance Education Standards for Academic and Student Support Services, June 2009
Guidelines for Distance Education Credit Program Array and Approval, June 2000