



RESOURCE MANUAL

for The Principles of Accreditation:
Foundations for Quality Enhancement



Southern Association of Colleges and Schools
Commission on Colleges

Third Edition: 2018, First Printing

APPENDIX C: Guidelines for Addressing Distance and Correspondence Education, Off-Campus Instructional Sites, and Branch Campuses

This guide provides assistance for peer reviewers when preparing to serve as evaluators of distance and correspondence education and also off-campus instructional sites and branch campuses, especially as part of the reaffirmation process. It should be used in conjunction with the *Principles of Accreditation*, the *Resource Manual*, and the *Handbook for Peer Evaluators* as well as the Commission policy [Reaffirmation of Accreditation and Subsequent Reports](#).

The underlying rationale for these reviews is that the *Principles of Accreditation* applies to all institutional programs and services, wherever located or however delivered. This includes programs offered through distance and correspondence education, off-campus sites, and branch campuses. The institution must have incorporated an assessment of its compliance with appropriate standards for these circumstances. Furthermore, federal mandates require that on-site reaffirmation committees explicitly review distance and correspondence educational programs as well as all branch campuses. The committee must also visit a representative sample of other off-campus instructional sites where 50 percent or more of the coursework for a program is offered.

Generally, issues of compliance with the *Principles of Accreditation* as related to off-campus sites and distance/correspondence education will appear in a committee's deliberations and in its report of findings within the standard of the *Principles* where there is an issue. If the issue is specific to location or mode of delivery, the narrative and the wording of the finding should make that clear. For example, the institution may have provided sufficient and acceptable information concerning distance education as it relates to physical resources, academic and student support services, library and learning resources, and the like, but totally omitted any reference about student access to full-time faculty or what role the faculty played at the locations or via the delivery mode. In that case, the review committee might find the institution in noncompliance with Standard 6.1 (Full-time faculty) and/or Standard 6.2.b (*Program faculty*), specifically citing that the issue is related to the location and/or modality of instruction, with details in the narrative of the report. However, if the nature of the issue is a general lack of attention in the institution's materials to distance or correspondence education, or to off-campus sites or branch campuses, there is a separate standard specific to that concern: Standard 14.3, which reads as follows:

The institution applies all appropriate standards and policies to its distance learning programs, branch campuses, and off-campus instructional sites. (*Comprehensive institutional reviews*)

When citing this standard of the *Principles* as in noncompliance (off-site committees) or in writing a recommendation on this standard (on-site committees), the review committee is essentially saying that the presentation was largely devoid of material that allowed a review of distance or correspondence education, and/or off-campus sites to include branch campuses. Such a finding or recommendation would then entail a rather substantial institutional response directed specifically

at the mode of delivery or location of delivery, and covering a broad array of standards from the *Principles*. However, the standards in the rest of the *Principles* where information was omitted could be found in compliance if the submitted materials support compliance for the locations and modes of delivery not covered by the finding in Standard 14.3.

Definitions

SACSCOC has developed specific definitions of key terms related to this guideline, as follows:

- Branch Campus** A branch campus is an instructional site located geographically apart and independent of the main campus of the institution. A location is independent of the main campus if the location is (1) permanent in nature; (2) offers courses in educational programs leading to a degree, diploma, certificate, or other recognized educational credential; (3) has its own faculty and administrative or supervisory organization; and (4) has its own budgetary and hiring authority.
- Correspondence Education** Correspondence education is 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. (See SACSCOC policy [Distance and Correspondence Education](#).)
- Distance Education** In conjunction with the federal definition, SACSCOC defines distance education as 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 video cassettes, DVDs, and CD-ROMs, if used as part of the distance learning course or program. (See SACSCOC policy [Distance and Correspondence Education](#).)
- Off-Campus Instructional Site** An off-campus instructional site is a teaching site located geographically apart from the main campus. A site at which an institution provides electronic delivery and where students go to access the support services needed is also considered an off-campus instructional site. The site is not independent of the institution's main campus.

Applicable Standards of the *Principles*

The following standards of the *Principles of Accreditation* make clear reference to either distance/correspondence education or to off-campus instructional sites. For these standards, the institutional narratives obviously must address location or mode of delivery, as applicable:

- Standard 10.6** An institution that offers distance or correspondence education:
- (a) ensures that the student who registers in a distance or correspondence education course or program is the same student who participates in and completes the course or program and receives the credit.
 - (b) has a written procedure for protecting the privacy of students enrolled in distance and correspondence education courses or programs.
 - (c) ensures that students are notified in writing at the time of registration or enrollment of any projected additional student charges associated with verification of student identity. (*Distance and correspondence education*)
- Standard 10.7** The institution publishes and implements policies for determining the amount and level of credit awarded for its courses, regardless of format or mode of delivery. These policies require oversight by persons academically qualified to make the necessary judgments. In educational programs not based on credit hours (e.g., direct assessment programs), the institution has a sound means for determining credit equivalencies. (*Policies for awarding credit*)
- Standard 13.7** The institution ensures adequate physical facilities and resources, both on and off campus, that appropriately serve the needs of the institution's educational programs, support services, and other mission-related activities. (*Physical resources*)
- Standard 14.1** The institution (a) accurately represents its accreditation status and publishes the name, address, and telephone number of SACSCOC in accordance with SACSCOC requirements and federal policy and (b) ensures all its branch campuses include the name of that institution and make it clear that their accreditation is dependent on the continued accreditation of the parent campus. (*Publication of accreditation status*)
- Standard 14.3** The institution applies all appropriate standards and policies to its distance learning programs, branch campuses, and off-campus instructional sites. (*Comprehensive institutional reviews*)
(This standard was discussed earlier in this guide.)

As noted above, the *Principles of Accreditation* applies to all institutional programs and services, wherever located or however delivered. The SACSCOC policy [Reaffirmation of Accreditation and Subsequent Reports](#) provides details on how this review will take place. Note that determination of

the importance and the sufficiency of coverage of extended sites and of distance and correspondence education in an institution's compliance materials is a matter of professional judgment by the review committee except where explicitly required by policy or by the *Principles*. The following guidelines may help institutions and reviewers make these judgments by using the SACSCOC policy on [Reaffirmation of Accreditation and Subsequent Reports](#) to determine where best to incorporate location and delivery mode in standards of the *Principles*. That policy should be consulted regarding specifics of planning and carrying out on-site reviews of off-campus instructional sites and branch campuses.

Mission

If the institution offers predominantly distance and correspondence education programs as its primary mode of delivery, this should be reflected in the institutional mission. Likewise, if expansive use of extended sites is the primary means of program delivery, that should be reflected in the institutional mission. Otherwise, the mission should not be inconsistent with the nature of such locations and modes of delivery. See Core Requirement 2.1 (*Institutional mission*).

Degree-granting authority

If the institution has physical sites in states or nations outside of the main campus, these should have appropriate governmental operating authority and/or degree-granting authority, if required. Similarly, if the institution has distance/correspondence education students enrolled from other states, it should provide evidence of state authorization, if required. If such authorization is not required, evidence should support that it is not needed. See Core Requirement 3.1.a (*Degree-granting authority*).

Multi-level governance

If branch campuses have their own boards, the relationship of these boards to the governing board of the institution should be clearly explained. See Standard 4.3 (*Multilevel governance*).

Faculty

Oversight of faculty teaching at extended sites and in programs offered predominantly via distance or correspondence education should be explained [see Standard 6.3 (*Faculty appointment and evaluation*)]. If students can earn 50 percent or more of the credits for a program at an extended site or via distance/correspondence education, there should be explanation of the responsibility for program coordination [see Standard 6.2.c (*Program coordination*)]. It would also be appropriate to explain the role of faculty development activities in preparing faculty to offer and teach courses using different modes of delivery [see Standard 6.5 (*Faculty development*)]. Faculty teaching at all sites and via all modes of delivery should be included in faculty rosters provided for Standard 6.2.a (*Faculty qualifications*). Faculty at branch campuses should be included in discussion of other parts of Section 6 (Faculty).

Institutional planning

If the institution has broad goals and outcomes regarding growth and development of off-campus sites and distance education, these should be pointed out in the discussion of Core Requirement 7.1 (*Institutional Planning*). Similarly, it should be clear whether extended sites and/or distance education students are part of the QEP (Standard 7.2) and if not, why not.

Student achievement

An institution is not required to report separate student achievement data by location of instruction or by mode of instruction. However, it should be clear from narratives how these sites and modes are incorporated into broader institutional statistics and into outcomes assessment measures. Institutions with multiple sites or with a broad array of distance learning programs may find it helpful to consider location or mode of delivery as a key variable in developing ways to use assessment results for program improvement. See Core Requirement 8.1 (*Student achievement*), as well as all of the student outcomes sub-standards in Standard 8.2 (*Student outcomes: general education*). It should be noted that an institution does have an obligation to establish comparability of instruction across locations and modes.

Educational policies, procedures, and practices

If branch campuses have academic policies or practices that vary from campus to campus, this should be explained in Standard 10.1 (*Academic policies*). Narratives in Standard 10.2 (*Public information*) should make clear how key public information is conveyed to students across sites and across modes of delivery.

Cooperative academic arrangements

Off-campus programs and distance/correspondence education are areas where contractual or cooperative agreements often occur. The nature of these agreements should be clear, as should that the institution has the capacity to ensure the quality and integrity of programs offered via such arrangements. See Standard 10.9 (*Cooperative academic agreements*).

Academic governance

If an institution has extended sites and/or distance/correspondence education programs, Standard 10.4 (*Academic governance*) should clarify the responsibilities of the faculty for the content, quality, and effectiveness of curricula, including those offered at off-campus sites and via distance or correspondence education.

Library and learning/information resources

Institutional narratives and documents should be explicit as to how students at off-campus sites and those enrolled in distance or correspondence education programs have access to adequate and appropriate library or related collections and services. All three parts of Section 11 (Library and Learning/Information Resources) will generally have supporting narrative related explicitly to location or mode of delivery.

Academic and student support services

It is common to see explicit reference to off-campus sites and to distance education in narratives relating to academic and student support services. The standard does not require identical services regardless of location or mode of delivery, but it should be clear as to the nature of services across locations and modes, and that the services match the needs of students by location and mode. See Core Requirement 12.1 (*Student support services*).

Student written complaints

Students at off-campus locations or taking courses via distance or correspondence education have rights to file written complaints with the institution. Narratives should make clear how this information is accessed for these students. See Standard 12.4 (*Student complaints*).

Financial documents

A characteristic of a branch campus is a degree of budgetary independence from the main campus. Institutions with branch campuses will need to discuss this, including budget approval processes, as part of its narrative in Standard 12.2 (*Financial documents*).

Physical resources

There should be explicit reference to the adequacy and appropriateness of the physical facilities and resources at off-campus instructional sites and branch campuses within Standard 13.7 (*Physical resources*). For branch campuses, the coverage under this standard will be very similar to what is provided for the main campus; use of a subheading for each branch campus might be considered. For smaller off-campus sites, the facilities should be discussed, whether or not under the direct control of the institution. Institutions offering distance education programs generally include a brief discussion of the learning management system and the IT backbone available to host the service.

Institutional environment

Institutions are responsible for the institutional environment at off-campus instructional sites and at branch campuses, whether or not the sites are under the direct control of the institution. Contracts, emails, surveys, and other documents might be relevant for inclusion under Standard 13.8 (*Institutional environment*).

Distance and Correspondence Education, Off-Campus Instructional Sites, and Branch Campuses Review Activities

The design of the on-site review of distance and correspondence education programs depends on a number of factors, some of which include:

- **Structure of the program.** Are there multiple types of programs? Is oversight centralized or decentralized? This will affect the time needed for the review as well as the logistics of the review.

- **Whom to interview.** The institution should provide an organizational chart to help identify key actors in reviewing distance education programs. Although the persons to be evaluated depend on the structure, size, and scope of distance learning activities, the people who should be considered for interviews are:
 - Students currently in the programs or formerly enrolled.
 - Main campus deans and directors responsible for distance learning activities, including those responsible for evaluating student learning.
 - Main campus faculty, student support personnel, and library/learning resource personnel involved in distance learning activities.
 - Off-site deans, directors, coordinators, faculty, librarians, and administrators (perhaps reviewed virtually).
 - Operational personnel such as IT staff, instructional designers.
 - General staff such as the chief academic officer, VP staff to whom other personnel report, institutional effectiveness staff.
- **Physical resources:** For extended sites, committee members generally take a tour of facilities. This is done even for sites that may be visited “virtually” due to travel restrictions, weather, and the like; institutions should be prepared to offer a means for such a “tour” to take place by an on-site committee. Classrooms, office space, locations to offer academic and student support services, and library/learning facilities are examples of physical resources offered. For distance education programs, this could include production facilities, if appropriate.
- **The Institutional Summary Form.** This should give the scope of distance education offerings.