Distance Learning

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Affected Parties:
Undergraduate
Graduate
Faculty
Staff
Other

1.0 Purpose

Distance learning (see Section 4. Definitions) is an integral component of higher education which, when effectively used, can expand access, improve quality, and minimize the cost of education. Distance learning courses increase opportunities and flexibility for both students and faculty to participate in teaching and learning, research and discovery, and outreach and engagement in courses and programs.

The purpose of this document is to establish and/or reaffirm administrative policy and procedure governing distance learning. Emphasis is given to accreditation requirements necessitating demonstration of responsibility for academic policies such as program approval, admission policies, acceptance of academic credit, practices for awarding credit, responsibility for curriculum, academic program coordination, university-wide coordination, management, support, and compliance of online and distance learning activities and initiatives with state, regional, and national agency regulations and requirements.

This policy defines the framework necessary to develop, deliver, support, assess, and coordinate distance learning courses and programs in the best interest of the university and its faculty, staff, and students.

2.0 Policy

The U.S. Department of Education, in 2010, issued requirements reminding institutions of higher education that each state is responsible for authorizing education offered to its residents from institutions outside the state. Each institution for which students qualify for federal student assistance is required to demonstrate that it has approval to serve students from other states, as in the case of distance education. Given the state-to-state complexities and differences in authorization requirements, national standards for interstate offerings of postsecondary distance education have been established through an agreement among member states called the State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement (SARA). The application process for the Commonwealth of Virginia and Virginia Tech's institutional participation, through our regional compact, Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), is underway. The reciprocity agreement requires approval from the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV), along with compliance with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) Distance and Correspondence Education Policy, SACSCOC Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degrees and Certificate Programs, the SREB's Electronic Campus Regional Reciprocity Agreement (SECRRA), the SREB's Electronic Campus Common Standards and Principles of Good Practice, the SARA Policies and Standards, and the Interregional Guidelines for the Evaluation of Distance Education Programs (Online Learning) adopted by the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC).

Department heads, in cooperation with program chairs (when present), and deans of respective colleges are charged with oversight of faculty who assume responsibility for ensuring academic rigor and quality of courses and programs. Institutional support for this pursuit includes opportunities and partnerships offered by both Technology-enhanced Learning and Online Strategies (TLOS), a division of Information Technology, and the Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost. The university does not wish to usurp or interfere with department and college responsibilities for oversight, but to support their endeavor by providing tools and resources to assist them and their faculty. Through this support, faculty will be prepared to develop and teach high-quality distance learning courses enhanced with effective use of technology to promote student engagement and academic success, while maintaining compliance with all accreditation, state, regional, and national regulations and guidelines.

All policies for distance learning, unless otherwise noted, are the same as for all university policies relating to faculty, students, courses, and programs including:

- General University Policies
- Finance and Business Policies
- Human Resources Policies
- Facilities Policies
- Academic Policies
- Information Technology Policies
- Student Affairs Policies
- Development and University Relations Policies
- Research Policies

In accordance with the Code of Virginia the university will include in its strategic plan information indicating to what extent it will use distance learning to expand access, improve quality, and minimize the cost of education. Similarly, the university will effectively manage the Distance Learning Enterprise Fund.

3.0 Procedures

3.1 Process for Ensuring Equivalency and Quality in Distance Learning Courses and Programs

Virginia Tech created TLOS for the support of faculty developing and teaching distance education courses. Two units of TLOS, Networked Learning Initiatives (NLI) and Networked Learning Design and Strategies (NLDS), provide support for faculty developing and preparing to teach courses in online (synchronous and asynchronous), hybrid, blended, flipped, and multi-modal delivery formats. NLI offers professional development for faculty in individual sessions and multi-session certification programs. NLDS provides instructional design and course development support through cohort-based professional development structuring the course development process, individual consultation, and promotion of templates created by instructional designers to provide a framework for independent course development. Both the cohort-based approach and the consultation/template approach are based upon a quality assurance process utilizing standards developed by Quality Matters®, widely recognized as a research-based and effective quality assurance standard for distance learning.

When a course is offered via distance learning, the Office of the University Registrar assigns a unique course reference number (CRN) to that course. The CRN is a unique five-digit identifier indicating the information about the course, including the delivery location as either a physical campus or virtual location. To support department heads with the assurance of high-quality distance learning course offerings, the Office of the University Registrar will serve as the point at which the safeguards of quality are verified. When a faculty member, program chair, or department head determines that a course will be taught via distance learning, the request for an appropriate CRN will be made to the Office of the University Registrar. The CRN will be provided on the condition that the faculty listed for the course has been identified as prepared and qualified to develop and teach an online course. The indicators of preparation and qualification will be completion of a TLOS professional development certification program, a full course development under the guidance and with assistance from TLOS staff, or consultation with TLOS instructional design staff and adoption of a template created by TLOS for distance learning courses.

Once qualified, faculty developing and teaching online courses will be identified as such by the Office of the University Registrar and CRNs for distance learning courses will be provided to courses taught by those faculty upon request. Department heads can refer those faculty not yet identified in the Office of the University Registrar as meeting the criteria for requesting a distance learning CRN to TLOS for assistance with meeting the criteria. In addition, TLOS will provide to department heads information and resources to assist them with review of courses to ensure equivalency of on-site and distance learning courses and a process for referral for assistance to meet criteria ensuring high-quality distance learning courses.

Assessing quality in any course, whether on-site or distance learning, relies heavily on the student perception of the effectiveness of the teaching strategies, course structure, and technology utilized. Virginia Tech utilizes a university instructional evaluation system that obtains data on student evaluation of the faculty and achievement of course outcomes. In order to obtain data for the assessment of quality in distance learning courses, questions will be included in the evaluation system addressing the types of technology utilized in the distance learning course, the perceived effectiveness of this utilization, the level and effectiveness of interaction, and the extent to which the technology enabled or inhibited that interaction. These data, as well as the examination of student products created in the course, will be used as part of the departmental review of the course.

3.1.1 New Program Development and Delivery

Development of a new program (degree, certificate, licensure, concentration) offered primarily through distance learning will follow existing university governance policies and procedures for approval. The program faculty coordinator will notify the offices of Enrollment Management, TLOS, and Strategic Analysis at least two months prior to the first term of distance instructional delivery that the proposed program will be using distance learning as its major delivery mode and instructional/interaction strategy. This will allow distance education support teams to plan for support of the program and faculty. Once the program is approved the faculty program coordinator will meet with Networked Learning and Design Services (NLDS, a unit of TLOS) faculty to discuss specific instructional design course development and assessment needs to be supported by the appropriate distance education teams.

3.1.2 Existing Program Development and Delivery

For an existing program that has already been approved through the university's governance system, and that the academic department has decided to offer in a distance learning format, the program faculty coordinator will notify the offices of Enrollment Management, TLOS, and Strategic Analysis that the existing program will be using distance learning as its major delivery mode and instructional/interaction strategy, and will meet with

NLDS faculty to discuss specific instructional design, course development, and assessment needs to be supported by the appropriate distance education teams.

3.1.3 New Course Development and Delivery

Development of a new course offered primarily through distance learning will follow existing university governance policies and procedures for approval. The faculty will meet with NLDS faculty to discuss specific instructional design, course development, and assessment needs to be supported by the appropriate distance education teams

3.1.4 Existing Course Development and Delivery

For an existing course that has already been approved through the university's governance system, and that the faculty choose to offer in a distance learning format, the faculty will meet with their respective department head and/or program chair to receive approval to offer in a distance learning format. The department head and/or program chair will notify the Office of the University Registrar of this change in delivery and refer faculty to NLDS to discuss specific instructional design, course development, and assessment needs to be supported by the appropriate distance education teams.

3.1.5 New Site-Based Videoconferencing Course Delivery

Credit courses delivered through videoconferencing technologies must be requested through TLOS to ensure that the proposed site(s) are on the university's approved list of sites (as approved by SCHEV) to receive instruction. If a proposed site is not on the approved list, the site must be certified by the NLDS director, or designee, prior to instruction being delivered to the site. The NLDS director will share information on new videoconferencing–based sites with the vice presidents and deans of undergraduate and graduate education.

3.2 Strategic Planning

The Code of Virginia requires each public institution of higher education to include in its strategic plan information indicating to what extent, if any, it will use distance learning to expand access, improve quality, and minimize the cost of education. Distance learning is included in Virginia Tech's five-year strategic plan, The Virginia Tech Difference: Advancing Beyond Boundaries. The Virginia Tech Information Technology Strategic Plan 2018-2024 includes services that directly support distance learning aspects of the university's strategic plan.

3.3 Distance Learning Enterprise Fund

3.3.1 Overview

The Distance Learning Enterprise Fund (originally the IDDL Enterprise Fund), or "instructional enterprise" fund, was established through Virginia General Assembly legislation in 2001. The legislation authorized Virginia Tech to establish a self-supporting fund to account for the revenues and expenditures of eligible distance learning classes to students at locations outside the Commonwealth of Virginia, and "to establish a program in which Internet-based (on-line) courses, certificate, and entire degree programs, primarily at the graduate level, are offered to students in Virginia who are not enrolled for classes on the Blacksburg campus or one of the extended campus locations." All eligible revenues shall exceed all direct and indirect costs of providing instruction to those students. The legislation delegates authority to the Board of Visitors to set tuition and fee rates to meet this requirement and to set other distance learning policies as appropriate.

A revenue distribution model that incentivizes enrollment growth within the Distance Learning Enterprise Fund is maintained by the Office of Budget & Financial Planning in accordance with this legislative intent.

3.3.2 Process for Participation

Distance learning programs do not automatically participate in the Distance Learning Enterprise Fund. Academic programs must be approved to participate in the unique funding model. The process will consist of the following steps:

1. The department and college will follow existing university governance policies and procedures for approval of the academic program.
2. The program faculty coordinator and/or department chair will meet with representatives from the Office of Budget and Financial Planning, Enrollment Management, and TLOS to discuss the program's potential for successful participation. The program must meet the following criteria:
   a. support the university's strategic plan,
   b. fit in an approved college enrollment plan, and
   c. have a strong financial outlook (competitiveness, defined market, adequate size) that can contribute back to the overall support and strength of the program.
3. The program faculty coordinator and/or department chair will complete the application for participation and will work with the Office of Budget and Financial Planning on a three-year financial plan for the academic program and route to college dean for review and approval.
4. If approved by college dean, the application and financial plan will be sent to the office of Enrollment Management for review and approval.
5. If approved by the Vice Provost for Enrollment Management, the application and financial plan will be sent to the Office of Budget and Financial Planning for review and recommendation for final approval by Vice President for Finance and Executive Vice President and Provost.
6. If approved for participation by senior administration, the program faculty coordinator and/or department chair will be notified by the Office of Budget and Financial Planning and program launch process may begin in accordance with the timeline outlined in the application and financial plan.

3.4 Design and Develop Awards

3.4.1 Overview

Design and Develop Awards are grants to support development of courses and programs offered in various modes including asynchronous and synchronous online, hybrids of on-site and online, flipped classrooms, technology-enhanced on-site classrooms, and flexible, multi-modal approaches.

The goal of the Design and Develop Awards is to ensure high quality, technology-enhanced, active and successful teaching and learning experiences in governance-approved courses either for initial delivery or existing courses for new delivery approaches.

Funding must result in courses with appropriate and equivalent rigor, content, and assessment as would be expected by the approval through governance process. Funds awarded provide the means through which faculty can dedicate the time and effort necessary for high-quality courses that foster academic success and enrollment growth.

A portion of the funding is provided to the department to allow for reassignment of one course of the faculty course load. Faculty developing courses must be released from one course during the semester of the development project. Departments may also hire a graduate assistant or teaching assistant to assist faculty developing courses, etc. with the funds provided to the department.

Grant recipients agree to participate in a semester-long professional development opportunity as part of a cohort of peers, work with an instructional designer team for guidance and assistance, submit developed course for quality assurance review, and serve as peer reviewer for at least one other developed course.

Upon completion of the course development project, the grant recipient must commit to review and approval by the department head prior to teaching the course for the first time. The faculty developer (grant recipient) is invited to present the completed course in a showcase event.

3.4.2 Proposal Process

The request for proposal (RFP) process is facilitated by Networked Learning and Design Services (NLDS, a unit of TLOS). Proposals are eligible for funding in two categories: individual course development and graduate certificate or degree programs. An RFP is announced early in Fall and Spring semesters. The RFP in Fall is for courses to be developed in Spring semester and taught the following Summer I, Summer II or Fall semester. The RFP in Spring is for courses to be developed in Summer I/II (combined) or Fall semester and taught in the following Fall, Winter semester, or Spring semester. For more information, the RFP timelines, and proposal forms, please contact the NLDS office.

3.5 Substantive Change Compliance

Ensuring compliance of "substantive changes" in distance learning as defined by the university's accrediting agencies is a shared responsibility among members of the university community. Faculty, programs, departments and colleges planning distance learning activities will follow the university's Substantive Change Policy and processes.

4.0 Definitions

Virginia Tech utilizes the most current definition of distance education from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges:

Distance Learning – distance education is 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, DVD's, and CD-ROMs if used as part of the distance learning course or program.

5.0 References

U.S Department of Education 34 CFR Parts 600, 602, 603, et al. Program Integrity Issues; Final Rules and Regulations, November 1, 2019

 https://ifap.ed.gov/sites/default/files/attachments/2019-11/FR110119FinalRegonAccreditStateAuthorization.pdf

Commission on Colleges Southern Association of Colleges and Schools – Distance and Correspondence Education Policy Statement
http://www.sacscoc.org/pdf/DistanceCorrespondenceEducation.pdf

Commission on Colleges Southern Association of Colleges and Schools – Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs
https://sacscoc.org/app/uploads/2019/08/commadap.pdf

The Southern Regional Education Board's Electronic Campus Regional Reciprocity Agreement (SECRRA), Common Standards, and Principles of Good Practice
https://www.sreb.org/publication/principles-good-practice

State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement Policies and Standards
https://www.nc-sara.org/sites/default/files/files/2020-07/SARA_Manual_20.2_Final_7.13.20.pdf

Interregional Guidelines for the Evaluation of Distance Education Programs
https://www.nc-sara.org/sites/default/files/files/2019-08/C-RAC%20Guidelines%282011%29.pdf

Code of Virginia 23-9.2:7 Distance learning
https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacode/title23.1/chapter9/section23.1-903/

Code of Virginia 2001 Appropriations Act Item 241, Authority: §§ 23-114 through 23-131
http://lis.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/legp604.exe?012+bud+51-241

Board of Visitors – Resolution on Distance and Distributed Learning at Virginia Tech, March 5, 2001

Code of Virginia 2014 Appropriations Act Item 223, Authority: Title 23, Chapter 11
http://lis.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/legp604.exe?142+bud+21-223

University Policy 6500: Substantive Change
http://www.policies.vt.edu/6500.pdf

6.0 Approval and Revisions

Approved August 20, 2008 by Mark G. McNamee, Senior Vice President and Provost.

- Revision 1
  Updated "Office of Distance Learning and Summer Sessions" to "Institute for Distance and Distributed Learning (IDDL)" due to reorganization in 2011 creating IDDL and Office of University Summer Sessions as two distinct units. As a result, the "associate vice president for distance learning and summer sessions" is no longer a current position; title has been updated throughout policy to "IDDL director."

Approved October 2, 2012 by Mark G. McNamee, Senior Vice President and Provost.

- Revision 2
  Major revision of policy and procedures due to dissolution of former Institute for Distance and Distributed Learning (IDDL), the creation of the new organization, Technology-enhanced Learning and Online Strategies (TLOS), to provide services for teaching and learning across the university, the revision of the revenue distribution model, the addition of State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement (SARA) requirements, and the update of accreditation, state, regional, and national regulations and guidelines.

  Reviewed and revised by Wanda Hankins Dean, Vice Provost for Enrollment and Degree Management and Dale Pike, Executive Director and Associate Provost, Technology Enhanced Learning and Online Strategies (TLOS)

  Approved March 4, 2015 by Mark G. McNamee, Senior Vice President and Provost.

- Revision 3
  Technical update in section 5.0 to update links.

  Approved March 11, 2020 by Kim O'Rourke, Vice President for Policy and Governance.

- Revision 4
  Technical update to reflect change in Provost's title, organizational department titles, and updates to section 5.0 links.

  Approved September 29, 2020 by G. Don Taylor, Executive Vice Provost.