DISTANCE EDUCATION STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES
Distance Education in a National Context

Distance education is becoming a standard practice in higher education.\(^1\) According to a report issued by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) entitled *Distance Education at Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions: 2006-2007*, enrollments in distance courses at public 4-year institutions exceeded 3.5 million for 2006-07 with 88 percent of public 4-year institutions reporting online enrollments. According to the Sloan Consortium’s 2008 report *Staying the Course*, online enrollments for fall 2007 accounted for nearly 22 percent of all higher education enrollments. Furthermore, the 12.9 percent annual growth rate for online enrollments far exceeds the 1.2 percent growth rate of the overall higher education student population. Additionally, distance learning is no longer limited to post-secondary education. A report by the North American Council for Online Learning (NACOL) indicates that, as of September 2007, 42 states offered online learning programs at the secondary level. Alabama is a leader in this area, with its ACCESS program infrastructure connected to every high school in the state.

Plausible explanations for the growth in distance education cite increasing globalization and the need for the current workforce to access higher education in order to compete in a global economy. The success of our national economy may very well depend on our collective ability to increase access to education and degree attainment for our citizenry. Distance learning provides flexible access to quality higher education for non-traditional students, often juggling both work and family obligations. Employed students are often able to receive tuition reimbursement from their employer as well, which makes pursuing further education more financially feasible.

The Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU)

In August 2009, the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU) completed a comprehensive, two-year study of online learning as a strategic asset. In its final report, the APLU presents observations about successful strategic online learning initiatives that can serve as a framework for thinking about Auburn’s present and future distance education activities. These observations are identified below, and are addressed in the following revised guidelines for distance learning at Auburn University.

\(^1\) The Southern Association of Colleges & Schools (SACS), the Alabama Commission of Higher Education (ACHE), and the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) define distance education consistently as:

*A formal educational process using technological delivery in which instruction occurs where students and instructors are not in the same place. Instruction may be synchronous or asynchronous. Distance education may employ audio, video, or computer technologies. Distance education, distance learning, and e-learning are recognized by the Commission (ACHE) as being synonymous terms. Academic courses or programs are considered to be distance education entities when over 50 percent of the content is delivered through distance education modes.*
Discussion:

Distance Education and Auburn University’s Vision and Mission Statement

Distance learning directly supports both the institution’s vision and mission statements. Auburn University’s Vision Statement affirms the “University's historic commitment of service to all Alabamians as the State becomes a part of a global society with all of its challenges and opportunities.” The Auburn University Mission Statement declares, “the University will provide traditional and non-traditional students broad access to the institution's educational resources. In the delivery of educational programs on campus and beyond, the University will draw heavily upon the new instructional and outreach technologies available in the emerging information age.”

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2 Auburn University Vision and Mission Statement
http://www.ocm.auburn.edu/welcome/visionandmission.html
Discussion:

Distance Education and Auburn University’s Strategic Plan

In keeping with Auburn’s vision and mission, core elements of the University’s current strategic plan involve enhancing distance education. To carry out these elements of the plan, the University will need to revise its distance learning policies and increase its distance learning offerings.

- **Strategic Priority 1** focuses on elevating academics and increasing the academic quality of the entering freshman class; Initiative 2 emphasizes applying new technologies and providing experience in online learning.

- **Strategic Priority 2** calls for building the research-enterprise foundation and notes specifically that distance education should be leveraged as one means of growing graduate student enrollment, including international graduate student enrollment (Initiative 2).

- **Strategic Priority 3** calls for an expansion of extension and outreach activities to better serve our communities and the state, noting that “new technologies and delivery methods make it possible for Auburn to expand its impact across Alabama.”

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3 Auburn University Strategic Plan, [http://ocm.auburn.edu/strategic_plan](http://ocm.auburn.edu/strategic_plan)
● **Strategic Priority 4** addresses the need to provide professional development for our faculty and staff. Toward this goal, online credit courses will be made available to employees at no cost to them under the existing tuition waiver policy (Initiative 3).

● **Strategic Priority 5** calls for a commitment to continuous improvement, citing the need to increase operational efficiency across the university as well as the need to generate new auxiliary sources of income.

**APLU Guideline #3:** Online learning programs overseen by academic affairs units may be more readily accepted and more easily integrated into the fabric of the institution.

**Status report:** All credit distance offerings reside within academic affairs, and the offering unit is responsible for ensuring compliance with the Southern Association of Colleges & Schools (SACS) Distance Education Policy Statement (Appendix B).

**Discussion:**

**Course and Program Offerings**

Auburn University will continue to develop and offer new distance education courses including:

- non-credit/non-degree courses for advancement or personal fulfillment;
- credit courses which count toward fulfillment of an undergraduate degree;
- credit courses which count toward fulfillment of a graduate degree program; and
- courses in consortia agreements.\(^4\)

**Non-credit/Non-degree Courses and Programs (Continuing Education/Professional Development)**

Auburn University will continue to develop and offer non-credit/non-degree courses and programs for professional development, advancement, and/or personal fulfillment. Students enrolled in these courses or programs will continue to be subject to tuition rates determined by market forces and internal cost analyses.

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\(^4\) From Auburn University “Distance Education Task Force Recommendations,” p. 2.
Students enrolled in these courses are not subject to Auburn University’s admission requirements.

**Credit Courses in Undergraduate Degree Programs**

All non-traditional/distance education students must meet Auburn University’s minimum admission requirements. All traditional undergraduate students will be eligible to take distance courses.

**Credit Courses in Graduate Programs, First Professional Degree Programs, and Certificate Programs**

All non-traditional/distance graduate students must meet Auburn University minimum admission requirements.

**Faculty Participation in Distance Offerings: Eligibility and Compensation**

Faculty members participate in providing distance education courses only if they choose to do so. Of tenure track faculty members, only those who are associate or full professors are eligible to teach a distance education course on overload. All distance education courses must meet enrollment minimums.

Faculty are permitted to have a maximum of one overload course (distance education or other course) each fall and spring semester. A maximum of two overload distance education courses are permitted in the summer per faculty member during summer terms.

Compensation for faculty members teaching distance education courses must be approved by the Provost, based upon a college rate. Faculty will not receive additional compensation for teaching a distance education course on-load. When a campus course and a distance course are offered in tandem, no overload pay will be generated unless both sections meet enrollment minimums. A waiver of this requirement may be requested for the first offerings of a new distance learning course.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{5}} \text{Ibid. p. 3}\]
Discussion:

The need for a greater degree of institution-level coordination and oversight of distance education programs is strongly suggested by the accreditation standards referenced in the Southern Association of Colleges & Schools (SACS) Distance Education Policy Statement (Appendix B). According to this policy, distance education students are entitled to adequate access to the appropriate range of services including admissions, financial aid, academic advising, placement, counseling, and resolution of complaints.\(^6\)

By providing centralized student services, marketing, and instructional design/development services, the university would likely gain operational efficiencies and benefit from the economies of scale that are possible with distance education delivery models. Furthermore, increased integration of services would benefit prospective students as they seek information and answers regarding enrollment in Auburn University distance programs.

The Office of Distance Learning and Outreach Technology (DLOT)

DLOT helps to identify programming opportunities, provides start-up funds for new programs, and assists in course and program development in a variety of ways, including the coordination of support units on campus as they relate to the SACS distance education standards listed in Appendix B.

DLOT will coordinate with the Biggio Center for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning and the Instructional Multimedia Group (IMG) to develop a robust faculty development series for distance teaching and all new distance learning faculty will be encouraged to participate during the term that they receive their first course development stipend.

\(^6\) Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Distance Education Policy: http://www.sacscoc.org/pdf/081705/distance education.pdf
University Distance Education Committee

A committee of distance education will be formed to guide the University as it continues to develop and refine its distance learning portfolio, policies, and procedures. The Provost will chair the committee, and membership will include the Director of DLOT, the Director of Institutional Research, the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Studies, the Dean of the Graduate School, and the Assistant Vice-President for Outreach.

APLU Guideline #5: Online learning programs need reliable financing mechanisms for sustainability and growth.

Status report: Auburn does not have a financing mechanism for sustainability and growth in place at the university level.

Discussion:

Financing Distance Education

Development and Funding of New Offerings

The Office of the Provost, the Graduate School, colleges, and departments, in collaboration with the Office of Distance Learning and Outreach Technology (DLOT), will identify subject areas where new distance courses are needed or desirable, and negotiate funding for the development of such courses.

Start-up funds and costs incurred for developing and offering courses (including faculty salaries, prep time, IT needs, etc.) may be provided by the Provost’s office or DLOT.

Undergraduate Distance Tuition Rates

Student tuition for undergraduate distance courses will be based on regular campus tuition rates, including residency distinction.

Graduate Distance Tuition Rates

Graduate students will be subject to tuition rates set by the offering unit and determined by market forces and internal cost analyses, subject to appropriate approvals. Graduate program tuition shall not be set at a rate lower than on-campus tuition.
For graduate distance offerings, the current distance learning fees of $67, assessed per credit hour, should be incorporated into a single tuition price, which should not decrease gross revenue for graduate distance learning offerings.

Fees

Off-campus distance students will not be required to pay student fees related to benefits and services provided only to on-campus students (e.g.: dining, transit, etc). With the appropriate approvals, the offering unit and/or the Office of Distance Learning and Outreach Technology (DLOT) may set an additional per-credit distance education fee to recover any additional distance education costs not covered by the university.\footnote{Ibid.p.4}

Courses in Consortia Agreements

Tuition and fees may vary for courses delivered or received as part of a consortia agreement.\footnote{Ibid.p.4}

Revenue Distribution

A revenue-sharing model will be implemented. The amount retained centrally will be distributed to units that invest in and/or provide support for program/course development, and provide support for the general university budget. The university Distance Education Committee will review programs and determine the appropriate level for revenue distribution.

Level One: The Provost’s office assumes all financial risk and guarantees recovery of offering unit costs. Offering unit receives 20% of gross revenue*; Central Administration retains 80%.

Level Two: The offering unit funds instructional costs including new, dedicated instructional support staff. Offering Unit receives 50% of gross revenue*; Central Administration retains 50%.

Level Three: The offering unit assumes all financial risk and guarantees recovery of costs. Offering unit receives 80% of gross revenue*; Central Administration retains 20%.

Level Four: Program proposals that do not fall within levels 1-3 may be proposed by the offering unit or a funding unit.

\footnote{Ibid.p.4}
* **Gross Revenue** - sum of tuition and fees collected; does not include any special fees charged to students for costs such as equipment, software, etc.  

**APLU Guideline #6:** Online learning programs succeed with consistent and adequate academic, administrative, and technological resources for faculty and students.

**Status report:** The adequacy of resources available to Auburn distance education programs is currently dependent upon a program’s level of revenue generation and is not consistent across the University. Inconsistencies in policy and procedure exist between Colleges.

**Discussion:**

**Intellectual Property**

Distance learning materials developed by faculty receiving a development stipend or with assistance from central support units will be considered University Assisted Individual Efforts, as defined by the Auburn University Copyright Policy. The materials shall be jointly owned by the faculty member and the University. The faculty member is free to utilize the materials in non-commercial venues with appropriate credit to the University. Likewise, should the faculty member ever be unwilling or unable to teach the course via distance or to teach sufficient sections of the course - the materials may be utilized by another faculty member, provided appropriate credit is given to the original author.

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9 Ibid. p.6
**APLU Guideline #7:** Online learning initiatives benefit from ongoing institutional assessment and review due to their evolving and dynamic nature.

**Status report:** Currently not all of Auburn’s distance education programs and courses are benefiting from ongoing institutional assessment. Student evaluations of instruction and support services are not reliably collected for each distance course. Retention and success data are not routinely analyzed in relation to campus equivalent courses.

**Discussion:**

The Offices of Institutional Research and Assessment (OIRA) and Distance Learning and Outreach Technology (DLOT) will work with offering units to ensure that this is being accomplished and documented in a variety of ways. Nationally-recognized quality rubrics and guidelines for distance education such as the SREB standards and the Sloan Consortium’s quality framework should be adopted.

The director of DLOT is currently included in University Curriculum Committee and Graduate Council meetings that pertain to distance learning offerings, and coordinates distance learning quality assurance and reporting measures.
Appendix A
Course/Program Approval Process

Distance education programs must undergo the university’s curriculum approval process, whether as new degree programs altogether, or as distance variations on existing degree programs. Both mandatory preliminary planning documents and program proposal forms are required to directly address the need and/or demand for the program in question; the justification presented is expected to provide a clear rationale for the implementation of distance education for the proposed program, as well as the impact that distance education delivery will have upon the unit’s existing infrastructure of resources. The distance education program is reviewed on its own merits, and any course additions or revisions that involve distance education delivery are then considered within the context of the proposal that is presented. For programs proposals in disciplines that involve laboratory or field experiences, special attention is given to how such aspects are addressed for distance education students.

Distance education course offerings that do not currently have an on-campus version will be subject to the appropriate stages of the curriculum development process and will be reviewed using the same standards used for all new courses. Special attention will be given to those aspects that would necessarily need to be addressed differently due to distance education delivery. A summary of specific concerns and issues to be addressed in the development of a distance education course, as well as other curriculum development resources and guidelines, is available on the University Curriculum Committee’s website (www.auburn.edu/academic/provost/under_gradstudies/univcc).

Distance education course offerings that are being developed as a variation of an existing course will also be subject to the university’s curriculum approval process, although it will involve a document provided by the unit, in addition to a syllabus for the existing course, that focuses on how the academic unit is adjusting the existing course framework to accommodate distance delivery (i.e.: how content will be delivered, methods of interaction and instruction, how to ensure that the coursework and awarded credit are equivalent to the on-campus version).
Appendix B
SACS Distance Education Policy Statement

DISTANCE AND CORRESPONDENCE EDUCATION

- Policy Statement -

Definition of Distance Education

For the purposes of the Commission's accreditation review, 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.

Definition of 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.

Policy Statements

1. At the time of review by the Commission, the institution must demonstrate 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 by verifying the identity of a student who participates in class or coursework by using, at the option of the institution, methods such as (1) a secure login and pass code, (2) proctored examinations, and (3) new or other technologies and practices that are effective in verifying student identification.

2. An institution that offers distance or correspondence education must ensure that it reports accurate headcount enrollment on its annual Institutional Profile submitted to the Commission.

3. Institutions must ensure that their distance and correspondence education courses and programs comply with the Principles of Accreditation. The referencing of the particular requirements listed in this policy does not imply that they are the only requirements of the Principles that apply to distance and correspondence education. This policy applies to degree and certificate programs and their courses. (See also COC guidelines called “Distance Education and the Principles of Accreditation.”)
Standards that Directly Apply to Distance and Correspondence Education

The citations below refer to the Principles of Accreditation: Principle of Integrity (PI), Core Requirements (CR), Comprehensive Standards (CS), and Federal Requirements (FR).

Curriculum and Instruction

Programs and courses provide for timely and appropriate interaction between students and faculty and among students. (CS 3.4.5)*

The faculty assumes responsibility for and exercises oversight of distance and correspondence education, ensuring both the rigor of programs and the quality of instruction. (CS 3.4.1 and CS 3.4.12)

The technology used is appropriate to the nature and objectives of the programs and courses and expectations concerning the use of such technology are clearly communicated to students. (CS 3.4.12)

There is currency of materials, programs, and courses. (CS 3.5.3 and CS 3.6.4)

Distance and correspondence education policies are clear concerning ownership of materials, faculty compensation, copyright issues, and the use of revenue derived from the creation and production of software, telecourses, or other media products. (CS 3.2.14)

Faculty support services are appropriate and specifically related to distance and correspondence education. (CS 3.4.9)

Faculty who teach in distance and correspondence education programs and courses receive appropriate training. (CS 3.7.3)

Admission and recruitment policies and decisions take into account the capability of students to succeed in distance and correspondence education programs. (CS 3.4.3)

Comparability of distance and correspondence education programs to campus-based programs and courses is ensured by the evaluation of educational effectiveness, including assessments of student learning outcomes, student retention, and student satisfaction. (CS 3.3.1)

The integrity of student work and the credibility of degrees and credits are ensured. (PI 1.1, CS 3.4.6, CS 3.5.3, and CS 3.6.4)

Program length is appropriate for each of the institution’s educational programs, including those offered through distance education and correspondence education. (FR 4.4)

If the institution uses a unit other than semester credit hours in its distance or correspondence education, it provides an explanation for the equivalency. The institution also provides a justification for all degrees that include fewer than the required number of semester hours or its equivalent unit. (CR 2.7.3)

Library and Learning Resources

Students have access to and can effectively use appropriate library resources. (CS 3.8.2 and CR 2.9)
Course requirements ensure that students make appropriate use of learning resources. (CS 3.8.2)

Access is provided to laboratories, facilities, and equipment appropriate to the courses or programs. (CS 3.8.1 and CS 3.8.2)

Student Services

Students have adequate access to the range of services appropriate to support the programs, including admissions, financial aid, academic advising, and delivery of course materials, and placement and counseling. (CR 2.10)

Students have an adequate procedure for resolving their complaints. (CS 4.5)

Advertising, recruiting, and admissions information adequately and accurately represent the programs, requirements, and services available to students. (PI 1.1 and FR 4.6)

Students enrolled in distance education courses are able to use the technology employed, have the equipment necessary to succeed, and are provided assistance in using the technology employed. (CS 3.4.12)

Facilities and Finances

Equipment and technical expertise required for distance and correspondence education are available. (CS 3.4.12)

Long-range planning, budgeting, and policy development processes reflect the facilities, staffing, equipment and other resources essential to the viability and effectiveness of the distance and correspondence education program. (CS 3.3.1, CS 3.8.3, and CS 3.11.3)

Adopted: Commission on Colleges, June 1997

Updated in accord with the revised Principles, December 2006

Endorsed: Executive Council, SACS Commission on Colleges, June 2009