



TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY HEALTH SCIENCES CENTER

Operating Policy and Procedure

HSC OP: 60.12, **Distance Education**

Purpose: Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center is committed to academic excellence that includes consistency between traditional classroom instruction and distance education. The purpose of this operating policy is to provide a framework for the development, implementation, and maintenance of formal degrees, certificate programs, and courses offered via distance education for academic credit.

Review: This HSC OP will be reviewed by October 1 every even-numbered year (EY), by the Digital Learning Committee, Academic Affairs and Curriculum Committee, and Academics Council.

POLICY/PROCEDURE:

1. Foreword

- a. The rights and responsibilities of the university, its employees, and its students in the distance education enterprise must be articulated clearly and applied consistently so that issues regarding ownership, control, evaluation, and operation of the TTUHSC's distance education programs may be resolved satisfactorily. The purpose of this policy is to specify how these issues shall be addressed.
- b. Distance education is defined as a course or program in which the majority of the instruction occurs when the students and instructor are not in the same physical setting. For some reporting purposes, distance education may also refer to an educational activity, such as a clinical rotation, practicum, internship, or externship, in which the student is engaged in a formal learning experience outside the state of Texas.
- c. Unless otherwise specified below, all current policies that apply to traditional face-to-face delivery of academic coursework shall also apply to distance education coursework.

2. Definitions

The definition of distance education varies across regulatory agencies and accrediting bodies. Several key definitions are included below for reference.

- a. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) defines distance education as the following:

"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."

For more detailed information, visit the [SACSCOC Distance Education and Correspondence Courses Policy Statement](#)

- b. The US Department of Education (USDE) defines distance education as the following:

"Distance education is education that uses one or more types of technology to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor synchronously or asynchronously."

The technologies that may be used to offer distance education include:

- (i) The internet;
 - (ii) One-way and two-way transmissions through open broadcast, closed circuit, cable, microwave, broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite, or wireless communications devices;
 - (iii) Audio conference; or
 - (iv) Other media used in a course in conjunction with any of the technologies listed above.
- (1) The US Department of Education further differentiates distance education *courses* from distance education *programs of study*. Courses and programs are considered distance education if ALL of their instructional portions can be completed remotely. Non-instructional in-person requirements (e.g., orientation and testing) do not exclude a course or program from being classified as exclusively distance education.
- (i) *Distance Education Course* is a single course in which the instructional content is delivered exclusively via distance education.
 - (ii) *Distance Education Program* is a program of study for which all the required coursework for program completion can be completed entirely via distance education courses.

(2) For more detailed information, visit the [USDE Distance Education in Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System \(IPEDS\)](#)

- c. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) defines distance education as:

"The formal educational process that occurs when students and instructors are not in the same physical setting for the majority (more than 50 percent) of instruction. Distance education can include courses and programs offered online, off-campus face-to-face, and electronic-to-groups. Coordinating Board rules recognize two categories of distance education courses: A distance education course in which 100 percent of instructional activity takes place when the student(s) and instructor(s) are in separate physical locations. Requirements for on-campus or in-person orientation, testing, academic support services, internships/fieldwork, or other non-instructional activities do not exclude a course from this category. A distance education course (hybrid course) in which more than 50 percent but less than 100 percent of instructional activity takes place when the student(s) and instructor(s) are in separate physical locations.

For more detailed information, visit the [THECB Distance Education Resources](#).

- d. Texas was approved as a State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (SARA) state in 2015 and is administered by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB.) The national council has defined, "The State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement is a voluntary agreement among its member states and U.S. territories that establishes comparable national standards for interstate offering of postsecondary distance-education courses and programs. It is intended to make it easier for students to take online courses offered by postsecondary institutions based in another state. The National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (NC-SARA) defines distance education as:

"Instruction offered by any means where the student and faculty member are in separate physical locations. It includes, but is not limited to, online, interactive video and correspondence courses or programs."

Supervised field experiences and out-of-state learning placements are also considered distance education for purposes of NC-SARA.

- (1) State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (SARA) do not address professional licensing board approval for programs leading to state licensing in fields such as nursing, teacher education, psychology, etc. However, in alignment with federal regulations, SARA-participating institutions are required to provide proper notification to students as to whether courses and programs will meet the professional licensure requirements in states where students are located. For specific information about professional licensure requirements for programs offered by TTUHSC, please see each program's website.
- (2) For more information, visit the [TTUHSC State Authorization webpage](#) or review the [NC-SARA Policy Manual](#).

3. **Procedures**

a. Learning Management System Support

- (1) All distance education courses and curricula must use the TTUHSC-supported learning management system.
- (2) Technology upgrades that require significant downtime are conducted between academic semesters with a minimum of one week's notice.

b. THECB's Principles of Good Practice

- (1) TTUHSC and its faculty/course instructors abide by the [THECB's Principles of Good Practice \(PGP\) for Distance Education](#).

c. Disclosures and Guidelines for Synchronous Components in Distance Education

- (1) TTUHSC degree programs with courses that have required synchronous in-person sessions will state this requirement in the program of study and in any publications or websites describing the program (truth in advertising).
- (2) When the instructor believes a synchronous in-person assessment or meeting is important for the integrity of the course, or to meet course outcomes, the instructor should try to limit the number of synchronous sessions (classes or assessments).
- (3) A distance education course with synchronous in-person assessments or meetings will state this in the syllabus.
- (4) An assessment on campus can be given, but other proctored in-person choices must be available. The instructor may invite students to campus, and will also offer the opportunity for students to complete the assessment in a proctored environment. This can be done with an approved proctor (identified by the student, and approved by the instructor) or with approved proctor software.

d. Roles and Responsibilities

(1) Digital Learning Committee

- (i) The committee's role is to collaborate with TTUHSC leadership and academic units in establishing and upholding academic policies, procedures, and priorities for distance education and to ensure alignment with institutional goals and regulatory requirements.
- (ii) The committee reports to the Provost through the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs and Integrated Learning.
- (iii) The committee is responsible for:
- (iv) Providing support on all institutional-level regulatory, reporting, and accreditation matters that pertain to distance education
- (v) Conducting a resource review for new academic programs, including certificate programs or degree programs in bachelor, master, doctoral, professional, or post-professional education.
- (vi) Conducting a resource review of substantive change to an existing program or significant curricular change including the following:
 - Dual Academic Award
 - Method of Delivery
 - Off-campus Instructional Site
 - Student Enrollment Limitations
- (vii) Providing guidance on the institutional Learning Management Systems (LMS) that provide centralized access points for information on electronically delivered courses, programs, and resources.
- (viii) Drafting and review policies, procedures, and priorities as related to institutional outcomes related to digital learning.

- (ix) Collaborating with the Office of Academic Planning and Compliance and TTUHSC schools to ensure compliance with THECB including the Principles of Good Practice (PGP), SACSCOC requirements, and federal regulations related to the implementation and delivery of distance education courses and programs.
- (x) Coordinating professional development opportunities to enhance faculty and instructor knowledge and application of effective teaching practices in distance education.
- (xi) Collaborating with schools to ensure compliance with Department of Education requirements related to the implementation and delivery of distance education courses and programs.
- (xii) Providing guidance for the development and maintenance of a website for distance education at TTUHSC.
- (xiii) Monitoring TTUHSC school compliance with the responsibilities described below.

(2) TTUHSC Schools

Each School is responsible for:

- (i) Adherence to requirements of SACSCOC, THECB, NC-SARA, USDE related to distance education, and the THECB's Principles of Good Practice (PGP) for Distance Education.
- (ii) Ensuring processes are in place to verify student identity at the time of enrollment and continuously throughout the coursework and/or program. This includes defining acceptable academic activities related to attendance in a distance education course.
 - Students will be notified in writing at the time of registration or enrollment of any projected additional student charges associated with the verification of student identity.
- (iii) Retention of course materials will follow the retention timeframe outlined in [HSC OP 10.09, Records Retention](#).
- (iv) Collaboration with TTUHSC in the ownership of instructional materials that are developed for distance education courses and the revenue derived from the creation of software or other media products that are developed for distance education courses shall be determined in accordance with [Regents' Rules and Policy Statement, Chapter 10, Intellectual Property Rights](#).

(3) Faculty and Course Instructors

Faculty and Course instructors are responsible for:

- (i) Adherence to the THECB's Principles of Good Practice (PGP) for Distance Education.
- (ii) Holding regularly scheduled office hours. These office hours can be conducted online.
- (iii) Ensuring the integrity of student work in courses and programs offered through distance education.
- (iv) Being accessible to students in accordance with the syllabus and guided by program or school policies and best practices, including availability via electronic means (TTUHSC email, LMS messaging, virtual office hours, conferencing, etc.) throughout the semester, and responding to student inquiries in a timely manner consistent with program or school expectations.
- (v) Recording attendance within the first week of class by demonstrating that students have participated in a face-to-face class activity or were otherwise engaged in an academically related online activity. Options to comply with attendance requirements could include:
 - Physically attending a class where there is an opportunity for direct interaction between the instructor and students.
 - Completion of an initial assignment regarding academic policies, introduction discussion board posting, or graded assignment.
 - Submitting an academic assignment.
 - Completing an exam, an interactive tutorial, or computer-assisted instruction.
 - Attending a study group that is assigned by the institution.
 - Participating in an online discussion about academic matters.
 - Initiating contact with a faculty member or instructor to ask a question about the academic subject studied in the course.

- (vi) Ensuring regular and substantive interaction between instructors and students. The Department of Education defines regular and substantive interaction as interactions that engage students in teaching, learning, and assessment consistent with at least two substantive activities, with scheduled and predictable learning opportunities, and with responsive and proactive monitoring of a student's academic engagement and success. Courses meant for distance education must fulfill the "regular and substantive interaction (RSI)" criterion mandated by the US Department of Education.

e. Proctoring Processes

To receive credit for Distance Education courses, students may be required to take proctored or non-proctored examinations. If requiring proctored exams in a distance education course, instructors need to include a statement in the syllabus and the course comments in the learning management system indicating that proctoring will be required.

Due to the varying needs within each discipline, each department is responsible for establishing its own policies for proctored and non-proctored examinations.

f. Approved Third-Party Remote Proctoring Software and Services

Remote proctoring software verifies student identity and monitors for behaviors that may indicate academic misconduct. Monitoring can be performed by human proctors or through automated systems using algorithms, machine learning, and artificial intelligence to detect anomalies or patterns inconsistent with typical assessment completion. To ensure the effectiveness and fairness of remote proctoring, faculty and course instructors are expected to be aware of the following important considerations when using remote proctoring software:

- (1) Students may be required to use a camera and microphone-equipped device and install software that restricts device functionality ("lockdown" features) during assessments.
- (2) Assistive technologies (e.g., screen readers and magnifiers) may not function optimally with proctoring software and could trigger false flags for misconduct. In such cases, Student Disability Services may recommend exemptions and propose reasonable accommodations to ensure equity and compliance with accessibility standards.

g. All remote proctoring tools used in TTUHSC's distance education programs must be approved by the institution to ensure compliance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), state contractual requirements, and accessibility standards. These tools safeguard student data privacy while supporting academic integrity through secure remote proctoring methods. Faculty may only utilize TTUHSC-approved proctoring software and services. Distance Education Student Complaint Process

- (1) U. S. Department of Education: The USDE requires institutions offering distance education to provide enrolled and prospective students with the contact information to file complaints with the institution's accrediting agency and with an appropriate state agency in the student's home state.
 - (i) Students should first try to resolve the issue with the school and/or institution's internal grievance procedures. These procedures are often available in the student handbook or academic catalog on the institution's website.
 - (ii) Students can file a complaint with the appropriate state agency if the issue cannot be resolved internally. Students can file a complaint with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board ("THECB") by sending the required complaint and other forms either by electronic mail to studentcomplaints@theccb.state.tx.us or by mail to THECB, Office of General Counsel, P. O. Box 12788, Austin, TX, 78711-2788. For more information about THECB's complaint process.

- h. State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (SARA) Student Complaint Process: Complaints against an institution operating under SARA policies go first through the institution's own procedures for the resolution of grievances. Allegations of criminal offenses or alleged violations of a state's general-purpose laws may be made directly to the relevant state agencies. Complaints regarding student grades or student conduct violations are governed entirely by institutional policy and the laws of the institution's home state. However, if a person bringing a complaint is not satisfied with the outcome of the institutional process for handling complaints, the complaint (except for complaints about grades or student conduct violations) may be appealed, within two years of the incident about which the complaint is made, to the SARA Portal Entity in the home state of the institution against which the complaint has been lodged. For detailed information on the grievance process, visit the SARA Policy Manual.