

Principles of Good Practice for Academic Degree and Certificate Programs and Credit Courses Offered at a Distance

The Principles of Good Practice for Academic Degree and Certificate Programs and Credit Courses Offered Electronically (PGP) was last revised in March 2010. With the dynamic role distance learning plays in academia, an update to the PGP was warranted. The Learning Technology Advisory Committee (LTAC) created a workgroup to collaboratively update the principles and produce the updated document that was set before the LTAC for review.

Content Changes

With the increased oversight and awareness at the national level of distance learning initiatives, the content in the original PGP needed to add coverage of topics related to accreditation, state authorization, and quality assurance. Additional study of the current requirements for accreditation and state authorization and the identification of common areas that promote best practices for delivery of distance education was also needed. Quality assurance standards were also aligned with the PGP to promote a high-quality experience for students.

Each topic in the document was derived from a collective review of the original PGP guidelines, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) standards, Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC) guidelines, Quality Matters (QM) rubrics, and Online Learning Consortium Quality Scorecard (SC). The original PGP included four main topics: Basic Assumptions, Curriculum and Instruction, Institutional Context and Commitment, and Evaluation and Assessment. The updated PGP is expanded to include three additional headings: Definitions, Facilities and Finances, and Adherence to Federal Requirements. Subheadings added to the document include planning, library and learning resources and faculty.

Feedback Process

As the PGP update was being developed, periodic reviews were conducted including presentations at the Texas Distance Learning Association, which offered an opportunity for feedback from conference attendees. Active members in distance learning, representing a diverse multitude of academic institutions, were asked to provide feedback to the workgroup. A list of contributing institutions and other participants is on page 2.

PGP Review

The committee will review the PGP every three years to ensure alignment with current distance learning practices in higher education.

Contributing Institutions

Public Two-Year Institutions

Alamo Colleges District
Alvin Community College
Blinn College District
Collin County Community College District
El Paso Community College District
Houston Community College
Kilgore College
Laredo Community College
Lone Star College System
South Texas College
Tarrant County Community College District
Tyler Junior College
Wharton County Junior College

Public Four-Year Institutions

Midwestern State University
Prairie View A&M University
Stephen F. Austin State University
Texas A&M International University
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi
Texas A&M University-Kingsville
Texas A&M University-San Antonio
Texas State University

Texas Tech University
Texas Woman's University
University of Houston-Clear Lake
University of North Texas
The University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston
The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio
The University of Texas of the Permian Basin
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
The University of Texas San Antonio

Independent Colleges & Universities of Texas

McMurry University
Our Lady of the Lake University

Associations

Texas Distance Learning Association

PRINCIPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE FOR ACADEMIC DEGREE AND CERTIFICATE PROGRAMS AND CREDIT COURSES OFFERED AT A DISTANCE

DEFINITION

Texas Administrative Code, Title 19, Part 1, Chapter 4, Subchapters P and Q define distance education as any formal educational process that occurs when students and instructors are not in the same physical setting for the majority (more than 50 %) of instruction. Distance education includes off-campus face-to-face, electronic to group, hybrid/blended, fully online, and 100 percent online courses and programs as defined by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB). Distance Education at all public institutions of higher education in Texas is designed to provide students across the state with access to courses and programs that meet their needs.

The Principles of Good Practice for Academic Degree and Certificate Programs and Credit Courses Offered at a Distance apply to course types in distance learning as described in the Texas Administrative Code, Title 19, Part 1, Chapter 4, Subchapter P, Rule 4.257 and Subchapter Q, Rule 4.272. Institutions of higher education should make a reasonable effort to provide an accurate description of hybrid/blended, fully online, and 100 percent online courses or programs to students, including the amount of face-to-face or synchronous meetings and in-person proctored exams.

Complying with the PGP guidelines does not guarantee compliance with federal requirements, regulatory authority or quality assurance standards. This document was derived from a collective review of the original PGP guidelines, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) standards, Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC) guidelines, Quality Matters (QM) rubrics, and Online Learning Consortium Quality Scorecard (SC). Each item has a list of standards or regulation documents that it is mapped to at the end of the statement. The item that is bolded is the originating document. If no item is bolded, then this item was in the original PGP. For example, the following entry means the statement came from C-RAC originally, but is also referenced in QM, SACSCOC, and SC:

Students using distance learning demonstrate proficiency in the use of electronic forms of learning resources. (**C-RAC**, QM, SACSCOC, SC)

BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

There are six basic assumptions central to the Principles of Good Practice for Academic Degree and Certificate Programs and Credit Courses Offered at a Distance.

1. The course or program offered at a distance is provided by or through an institution that is accredited by an accrediting agency recognized by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and authorized to operate in the state where the course or program originates.
2. The institution's programs and courses holding specialized accreditation meet the same requirements when offered at a distance.
3. The "institution" may be a single institution or a consortium of such institutions.
4. These principles are generally applicable to degree or certificate programs and to courses offered at a distance.
5. It is the institution's responsibility to review educational programs and courses it provides at a distance and certify continued compliance with these principles.
6. Institutions offering programs or credit courses are responsible for satisfying all in-state approval and accreditation requirements before students are enrolled.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT AND COMMITMENT

There are 31 principles related to Institutional Context and Commitment which are separated into the subheadings Role and Mission, Planning, Students and Student Services, Library and Learning Resources, Faculty Support, and Resources for Learning.

Role and Mission

1. If an institution offers a significant portion of its courses and programs at a distance, it should be clearly reflected in the institution's mission. (C-RAC, **SACSCOC**, SC)
2. The mission statement explains the role of distance learning within the range of the institution's programs and services. (**C-RAC**, SACSCOC)
3. Institutional and program statements of vision and values inform how the distance learning environment is created and supported. (**C-RAC**, SACSCOC)
4. As appropriate, the institution incorporates into its distance learning programs methods of meeting the stated institutional goals for the student experience at the institution. (**C-RAC**, SACSCOC)
5. The recruitment and admissions programs supporting the distance learning courses and programs appropriately target the student populations to be served. (**C-RAC**, SACSCOC)
6. The students enrolled in the institution's distance learning courses and programs fit the admissions requirements for the students the institution intends to serve. (**C-RAC**, SACSCOC)
7. Senior administrators and staff can articulate how distance learning is consonant with the institution's mission and goals. (**C-RAC**, SACSCOC, SC)

Planning

8. The institution prepares a multi-year budget for distance learning that includes resources for assessment of program demand, marketing, appropriate levels of faculty and staff, faculty and staff development, library and information resources, and technology infrastructure. (**C-RAC**, SC)
9. The institution provides evidence of a multi-year technology plan that addresses its goals for distance learning and includes provision for a robust and scalable technical infrastructure. (**C-RAC**)
10. Development and ownership of plans for distance learning extend beyond the administrators directly responsible for it and the programs directly using it. (**C-RAC**)
11. Planning documents are explicit about any goals to increase numbers of programs provided through distance learning courses and programs and/or numbers of students to be enrolled in them. (**C-RAC**)
12. Plans for distance learning are linked effectively to budget and technology planning to ensure adequate support for current and future offerings. (**C-RAC**)
13. Plans for expanding distance learning demonstrate the institution's capacity to assure an appropriate level of quality. (**C-RAC**)
14. The institution and its distance learning programs have a track record of conducting needs analysis and of supporting programs. (**C-RAC**)

Students and Student Services

15. Advertising, recruiting, and admissions materials clearly and accurately represent the distance learning course or program and the services available. (C-RAC, **SACSCOC**, SC)
16. The institution has admission/acceptance criteria in place to assess the extent to which a student has the background, knowledge and technical skills required to undertake the course or program. (C-RAC, SACSCOC, SC)
17. Course/program announcements and electronic catalog entries provide appropriate and accurate information for distance learning courses such as program goals, academic

- requirements, academic calendar, and faculty. (C-RAC, SACSCOC, SC)
18. Students should be provided with clear, complete, and timely information on the curriculum, course and degree program requirements, nature of faculty/student interaction, assumptions about technological competence and skills, technical equipment requirements, availability of academic support services and financial aid resources, and costs and payment policies. (C-RAC, QM, SACSCOC, SC)
 19. The institution provides good web-based information to students about the nature of the distance learning environment and assists them in determining if they possess the skills important to succeed in distance learning. (**C-RAC**, SACSCOC, SC)
 20. Students enrolled in distance education courses are able to use the technology employed, have the equipment necessary to succeed, and are provided assistance in the technical environment. (C-RAC, **SACSCOC**, SC, QM)
 - a. The institution provides a distance learning orientation program; (**C-RAC**, SC)
 - b. Students in distance learning programs have ready access to technology support, preferably 24/7 support; (**C-RAC**, SC)
 - c. Students using distance learning demonstrate proficiency in the use of electronic forms of learning resources. (**C-RAC**, QM, SACSCOC, SC)
 21. Students have adequate access to the range of services appropriate to support the programs offered through distance education. (C-RAC, QM, **SACSCOC**, SC)
 - a. Students in distance learning programs have adequate access to student services, including financial aid, course registration, and career and placement counseling; (**C-RAC**, QM, SACSCOC, SC)
 - b. The institution provides support services to students in formats appropriate to the delivery of the distance learning program. (**C-RAC**, QM, SACSCOC, SC)
 22. Enrolled students have reasonable and adequate access to the range of student services and student rights appropriate to support their learning. (C-RAC, QM, SACSCOC, SC)
 - a. Student complaint processes are clearly defined and can be used electronically; (**C-RAC**, SACSCOC, SC)
 - b. Students in distance programs have an adequate procedure for resolving their complaints, and the institution follows its policies and procedures. (C-RAC, **SACSCOC**, SC)
 23. Students are provided with reasonable and cost-effective ways to participate in the institution's system of student authentication. (**C-RAC**, SACSCOC)
 24. Documented procedures assure that security of personal information is protected in the conduct of assessments and evaluations and in the dissemination of results. (C-RAC, **SACSCOC**)

Library and Learning Resources

25. Students have access to and can effectively use appropriate library and learning resources. (**SACSCOC**, C-RAC, SC, QM)
26. Students using distance learning have adequate access to learning resources, including library, information resources, laboratories, equipment appropriate to academic courses or programs. (SACSCOC, **C-RAC**, SC, QM)

Faculty Support

27. The course of program provides faculty support services and training specifically related to teaching via distance learning modalities. (C-RAC, SACSCOC, SC)
28. The institution provides adequate equipment, software, and communications access to faculty to support interaction with students, institutions, and other faculty. (C-RAC, SACSCOC)

29. Policies for faculty evaluation include appropriate recognition of teaching and scholarly activities related to courses of programs offered via distance. (C-RAC, SACSCOC)

Resources for Learning

30. The institution ensures that appropriate learning resources are available to students. (C-RAC, SACSCOC, SC, QM)
31. The institution evaluates the adequacy of and the cost to students for access to learning resources. (C-RAC)

CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

There are 24 principles related to Curriculum and Instruction.

1. A degree or certificate course or program offered electronically is coherent and complete. (C-RAC, SACSCOC)
2. The course or program provides for regular and substantive interaction between faculty and students, students and students, and student and content. (C-RAC, SACSCOC, SC, QM)
3. Academic standards and student learning for all courses or programs offered at a distance will be the same as those for courses or programs delivered by other means at the institution where the course or program originates. (C-RAC, SACSCOC, SC)
4. Qualified faculty provide appropriate oversight of the course or program that is offered electronically. (C-RAC, SACSCOC)
5. The faculty assumes primary responsibility for and exercises oversight of distance education, ensuring both the rigor of programs and the quality of instruction. (C-RAC, **SACSCOC**)
6. The technology used is appropriate to the nature and objectives of the courses and programs and expectations concerning the use of such technology are clearly communicated to students. (C-RAC, **SACSCOC**, SC, QM)
7. Distance 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. (**SACSCOC**, C-RAC)
8. Academic support services are appropriate and specifically related to distance education. (**SACSCOC**, C-RAC, SC, QM)
9. Program length is appropriate for each of the institution's educational programs, including those offered through distance education. (**SACSCOC**, C-RAC, SC)
10. For all degree programs offered through distance education, the programs embody a coherent course of study that is compatible with the institution's mission and is based upon fields of study appropriate to higher education. (**SACSCOC**, C-RAC, SC)
11. For all courses offered through distance education, the institution employs sound and acceptable practices for determining the amount and level of credit awarded and justifies the use of a unit other than semester credit hours by explaining its equivalency. (**SACSCOC**, C-RAC)
12. An institution entering into consortial arrangements or contractual agreements for the delivery of courses/programs or services offered by distance education is an active participant in ensuring the effectiveness and quality of the courses/programs offered by all of the participants. (**SACSCOC**, C-RAC)
13. The institution's policies on academic integrity include explicit references to online learning and are discussed during the orientation for online students. (**C-RAC**, QM)
14. Approval of online courses and programs follows standard processes used in the college or university. (**C-RAC**)
15. Online learning courses and programs are evaluated on a periodic basis. (**C-RAC**)

16. The curricular goals and course objectives show that the institution or program has knowledge of the best uses of online learning in different disciplines and settings. **(C-RAC, SACSCOC, SC)**
17. Curricula delivered through online learning are benchmarked against on-ground courses and programs, if provided by the institution, or those provided by traditional institutions. **(C-RAC)**
18. The curriculum is coherent in its content and sequencing of courses and is effectively defined in easily available documents including course syllabi and program descriptions. **(C-RAC, QM, SACSCOC, SC)**
19. Scheduling of online learning courses and programs provides students with a dependable pathway to ensure timely completion of degrees. **(C-RAC)**
20. The institution or program has established and enforces a policy on online learning course enrollments to ensure faculty capacity to work appropriately with students. **(C-RAC)**
21. Expectations for any required face-to-face, on-ground work (e.g., internships, specialized laboratory work) are stated clearly. **(C-RAC)**
22. Curriculum design and the course management system enable active faculty contribution to the learning environment. **(C-RAC, QM)**
23. Course and program structures provide schedule and support known to be effective in helping online learning students persist and succeed. **(C-RAC, QM, SACSCOC, SC)**
24. Accessibility of course content and technologies required for course completion is reviewed and alternative methods for access are identified if necessary. **(QM, SC)**

FACULTY

There are ten principles related to Faculty.

1. The institution's faculty have a designated role in the design and implementation of its online learning offerings. **(C-RAC)**
2. An institution offering distance learning courses/programs ensures that there is a sufficient number of faculty qualified to develop, design, and teach the courses/programs. **(C-RAC, SACSCOC)**
3. The institution has clear criteria for the evaluation of faculty teaching distance education courses and programs. **(C-RAC, SACSCOC, SC)**
4. Faculty who teach in distance education courses and programs receive appropriate training. **(C-RAC, SACSCOC, SC)**
5. Online learning faculties are carefully selected, appropriately trained, frequently evaluated, and are marked by an acceptable level of turnover. **(C-RAC, SACSCOC, SC)**
6. The institution's training program for online learning faculty is periodic, incorporates tested good practices in online learning pedagogy, and ensures competency with the range of software products used by the institution. **(C-RAC, SACSCOC, SC)**
7. Faculty are proficient and effectively supported in using the course management system. **(C-RAC, SACSCOC)**
8. The office or persons responsible for online learning training programs are clearly identified and have the competencies to accomplish the tasks, including knowledge of the specialized resources and technical support available to support course development and delivery. **(C-RAC, SACSCOC)**
9. Faculty members engaged in online learning share in the mission and goals of the institution and its programs and are provided the opportunities to contribute to the broader activities of the institution. **(C-RAC, SACSCOC)**
10. Students express satisfaction with the quality of the instruction provided by online learning faculty members. **(C-RAC, SACSCOC, SC)**

EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT

There are seven principles related to Evaluation and Assessment.

1. Assessment of student learning follows processes used in onsite courses or programs and/or reflects good practice in assessment methods. (**C-RAC**, QM, SACSCOC)
2. Student course evaluations are routinely taken and an analysis of them contributes to strategies for course improvements. (**C-RAC**, SACSCOC)
3. The institution regularly evaluates the effectiveness of the academic and support services provided to students in online courses and uses the results for improvement. (**C-RAC**, SACSCOC)
4. The institution documents its successes in implementing changes informed by its programs of assessment and evaluation. (**C-RAC**, SACSCOC)
5. The institution sets appropriate goals for the retention/persistence of students using online learning, assesses its achievement of these goals, and uses the results for improvement. (**C-RAC**, SACSCOC)
6. If faculty roles are distributed, the evaluation strategies ensure effective communication between faculty members who design curriculum, faculty members who interact with students, and faculty members who evaluate student learning. (**C-RAC**, SACSCOC)
7. The institution utilizes examples of student work and student interactions among themselves and with faculty in assessment of program learning outcomes. (**C-RAC**, SACSCOC)

FACILITIES AND FINANCES

There are two principles related to Facilities and Finances.

1. Appropriate equipment and technical expertise required for distance education are available. (C-RAC, QM, **SACSCOC**, SC)
2. The institution, in making distance education courses/programs a part of its mission, provides adequate funding for faculty, staff, services, and technological infrastructure to support the methodology. (C-RAC, **SACSCOC**, SC)

ADHERENCE TO FEDERAL REQUIREMENTS

There are 6 principles related to Adherence to Federal Requirements.

1. The institution demonstrates that the student who registers in a distance 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. (C-RAC, **SACSCOC**, SC)
2. The institution demonstrates that it has a written procedure for protecting the privacy of students enrolled in distance education courses or programs. (C-RAC, **SACSCOC**, SC)
3. The institution demonstrates that it has a written procedure distributed at the time of registration or enrollment that notifies students of any projected additional student charges associated with verification of student identity. (C-RAC, **SACSCOC**)
4. The institution that offers distance education must ensure that it reports accurate headcount enrollment on its annual Institutional Profile submitted to the Commission. (C-RAC, **SACSCOC**)
5. The institution demonstrates that efforts are made to ensure compliance with federal and state accessibility requirements. (**SC**)

6. The institution demonstrates that efforts are made to ensure compliance with federal student financial aid requirements. (**NASFAA**)

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