

**Distance Education and the Six Regional Accrediting Commissions: A Comparative  
Analysis**

by

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## Introduction

The last comparative analysis of distance education principles and practices used by the six major regional accrediting commissions (New England, Middle States, North Central, Southern, Northwest, and Western) was conducted as part of a master's thesis in August, 2000 by Southern Illinois graduate student, Vincent Flango (Flango). During this time, and since, distance education has burgeoned but its learning outcomes has also come under closer scrutiny by the institutions who sponsor it, by the consortiums and associations who administer it, and by Congress and other legislative bodies who regulate it. The six regional accreditation agencies have each responded—and will continue to respond—to these changes and interests in the prevailing political and educational environ. Therefore, this study is a snapshot-in-time of the approach presently used by each of the major regional accrediting commissions to review those distance learning programs within the scope of their influence—it, too, will stand in need of being updated again in just a few years.

One author observed in 1996 that “accreditation is at a crossroads....Accreditation ‘took it on the chin’ during the 1992 reauthorization process. Rightly or wrongly, Congress exhibited little confidence in accreditation’s ability to handle fraud.... There was general confusion in the Congress about what accreditation does, how it works, and whether it is effective” (Glidden, p. 22). These concerns have persisted as part of the discussion surrounding the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act in 2006. Congress has threatened major changes in the reaccreditation process and the special Commission formed by the Secretary of Education (Spellings) has recommended that it be overhauled.

In the 1998 reauthorization “the United States Department of Education (USDE) had proposed that the Higher Education Act require there be separate and additional quality standards for distance education, and that a department section of the USDE be charged with recognizing and reviewing distance education activities. This proposal was rejected by Congress, and the amendments specifically declared that distance learning programs have the same standards as other programs, thus ensuring that control over distance education standards would remain in the hands of the accrediting agencies and the colleges and universities” (Bloland, 2001, p. 189).

The history of each of the accreditation commissions is as unique and sometimes inexplicable as is the assignment of certain states to accrediting regions, but one thing that they have shared in common since their inception—now over a century for some of them—is their regional autonomy. However, recent advances in instructional technology and communication have made the world a smaller and different place. One author described the recent phenomenon this way: “Distance education did not respect geography, and momentous questions of jurisdiction, quality assurance, and monitoring were faced by those who tried to keep track of higher education when it began to lose its geographical moorings” (Bloland, 2001, p. 35).

In 1993, Robert S. Palinchak stated that “accreditation models and standards vary distinctively among the six geographic accreditation regions that cover the United States and its territories” and then predicted that “without a common set of outcomes to be measured by accreditation, there can be no common understanding or expectations of the accreditation process” (p. 5). Four years later another author observed that this world of “expanded access” would present all kinds of challenges to accrediting agencies and their

guidelines which “are often not adequate” (Gellman-Danley, 1997, p. 73). Finally, in August 2000, Flango documented not only the disparity in distance education principle, policy, and practice across the six regional accrediting commissions but represented the call from a number of institutions and organizations for more consistency and standardization: “Studies, conferences, and symposiums on distance learning accrediting policies seem to agree to the need for consistency when devising policies, as well as the need to maintain high standards of quality, but not to the extent of being restive or stifling for innovation to occur” (p. 14).

One author observed that “for some accrediting agencies, increased use of distance learning demands complex, separate standards. For others, it is a matter of principle to assure consistency across programs through integrated guidelines that do not reference where learning is delivered” (Gellman-Danley, 1997, p. 75).

As this trend toward greater specificity of competencies in the requirements for accreditation continues among the specialized accreditation community, it may mean that fewer of them see the need for separate standards or even separate policies or procedures for distance learning. In fact, this has already happened, to some degree. One accreditor had separate guidelines for distance learning in its 1994 standards, but now chooses to view distance learning as an acceptable teaching method and to require programs that offer distance learning to meet the same competency-based standards as campus-based programs.

Other accreditors that do not have separate standards for distance learning are examining the practices of their colleagues with respect to distance learning,

not to develop new standards for distance learning, but rather to obtain some guidance on how to interpret their existing standards in the distance learning environment. This information can be helpful either to programs that offer distance learning or to site team members who review programs with distance learning. (CHEA, 2002, p. 5)

Regardless of the sector in which distance learning is occurring, . . . regional accrediting organizations have adopted a common platform for review of distance learning. The platform serves as a basis for common understanding among the regional accreditors of those elements that support quality in distance learning. The platform informs and supports the distance learning policies and processes in each region. The best practices in distance learning that are the key planks of this platform enable regional accreditors to isolate the distinctive features of distance learning offerings and to examine their quality. (CHEA, 2002, p. 7)

***Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Academic Degree and Certificate Programs (Good Practice)***

The *Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Academic Degree and Certificate Programs* (hereafter *Good Practice*) was adopted by the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET) (under Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education [WICHE]) on June 6, 1995. The *Principles* are the product of a WCET project funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE). This project was called "Balancing Quality and Access: Reducing State Policy Barriers to Electronically Delivered Higher Education

Programs.” The *Principles* document includes a preamble, explaining the background for the creation of the document, and then begins listing the principles.

The principles are divided into two main sections: (1) Curriculum and Instruction and (2) Institutional Context and Commitment. The second section is further developed into six standards: (1) Role and Mission, (2) Faculty Support, (3) Resources for Learning, (4) Students and Student Services, (5) Commitment to Support, and (6) Evaluation and Assessment. The first section, Curriculum and Instruction, includes four standards, which address learning outcomes, clarity and completeness of programs, appropriate interaction between faculty and students, and faculty oversight of programs. The Role and Mission section (two standards) ensures that technology is appropriately used to meet program objectives and that programs are consistent with the institution’s role and mission. Faculty Support (two standards) focuses on training and services for faculty who teach via the use of technology. Resources of Learning (one standard) ensures that learning resources are available to students. The Students and Student Services section (four standards) concentrates on students’ access to information and services, students’ background with technology, and the accuracy of admissions materials. Commitment to Support (two standards) focuses on the evaluation of faculty as related to electronically offered programs and also looks at the continuation of programs until students can complete their degree. The last section, Evaluation and Assessment (two standards), concentrates on the evaluation of programs’ educational effectiveness and on the assessment of student achievement.

***Guidelines for Distance Education (hereafter Guidelines)***

In 1997, the six regional accrediting commissions adopted the *Guidelines for Distance Education* (hereafter *Guidelines*). This document was written as an extension of the *Principles* (1995).

This document contains five sections: (1) Curriculum and Instruction, (2) Evaluation and Assessment, (3) Library and Learning Resources, (4) Student Services, and (5) Facilities and Finance. Four of these sections are based on those in the *Principles*, but the last section, Facilities and Finance, is new to this document. There are 19 standards within these five sections. Eleven of the standards appear to be derived from the standards included in the *Principles*.

***Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Program (Best Practices)***

In 2000, WCET and the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC) began to draft new guidelines. The result was two documents adopted by the regional accrediting commissions in March 2001: *Statement of Commitment by the Regional Accrediting Commissions for the Evaluation of Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs* (hereafter *Statement*) and the *Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Program* (hereafter *Best Practices*).

The *Statement* expresses “the approach of the regional commissions to . . . emergent forms of learning” (2000, p. 1). The conclusion of the *Statement* explains the development of the *Best Practices*. It reads,

As the higher education community increasingly expand educational opportunities through electronically offered programming, the regional commissions are

committed to supporting good practice in distance education among affiliated colleges and universities. Doing so is in keeping with their mission to encourage institutional improvement toward a goal of excellence. To this end several years ago, each commission adopted and implemented a common statement of *Principles of Good Practice in Electronically Offered Academic Degree and Certificate Programs* developed by the WCET, resulting in a shared approach to distance education. More recently, desiring to complement these efforts, the regional commissions collectively, through C-RAC, contracted with WCET to fashion a more detailed elucidation of those elements which exemplify quality in distance education. Based upon the expertise of WCET and the already substantial experience of the regional commissions in assessing distance education, the resulting statement, *Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs*, provides a comprehensive and demanding expression of what is considered current best practice. It is being utilized by each commission, compatibly with their policies and procedures to promote good practice in distance education among their affiliated colleges and universities. (2000, p. 5)

The *Best Practices* is comprised of five sections: (1) Institutional Context and Commitment, (2) Curriculum and Instruction, (3) Faculty Support, (4) Student Support, and (5) Evaluation and Assessment.



There are now 27 principles—10 more than *Good Practices* and 8 more than *Guidelines*—and each principle in the *Best Practices* is supported by operational questions to facilitate more widespread standardization and implementation. . . . Although many of the principles within *Best Practices* are derived from those in the previous documents, *Best Practices* does have several new principles. These new principles address issues such as distance education being considered a substantive institutional change, institutional understanding of legal and regulatory requirements, working with consortial partners, strategies of inclusion, security of personal information, and then the overarching idea of distance education evaluation taking place within the context of full institutional evaluation. (Howell & Baker, 2006, p.41)

Some commissions have deeply integrated these standards into their handbooks and policies, while others have made them available as guidelines for institutions within their region. The two commissions, Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) and Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), who have integrated these standards into policies, however, used the *Guidelines* as the basis for their policy rather than the more updated *Best Practices*. NWCCU Policy 2.6, *Distance Delivery of Courses, Certificate, and Degree Programs* was adopted in 1996 and last revised in 1998. Policy 2.6 is based on the *Guidelines* and also includes a few standards from the earlier, *Good Practices* document. SACS's distance education policy was adopted in June 1997 and revised in June 2003.

In Table 1 an analysis of the Web sites for each of the six commissions shows whether the *Statement of Commitment* and the *Best Practices* are present and accessible

to those institutions reviewed by the respective Commission. The balance of this study focuses on what materials, guidelines, handbooks and so forth that each of the six Commissions make available to their institutions with distance education programs.

Table 1

*“Statement of Commitment” and “Best Practices” on Commission Web Sites*

<b>Commission</b>	<i>Statement of Commitment</i>	<i>Best Practices</i>
Middle States	X	X
New England	X	X
North Central	X	X
Northwest		
Southern		X
Western	X	X

X = document is available on their website

### Comparative Analysis

The comparative analysis of the six regional accrediting commissions review of distance education programs that follows will be comprised of two parts: (1) basic information on each of the Commissions, (i.e., formal name; founding date; number of post-secondary institutions; geographic regions; contact information, including Web site; and official documents with hyperlinks), and, (2) a summary of changes by each Commission since those documented by Flango in 2000.

Table 2

*New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC-CIHE) Commission on Institutions of Higher Education*

<p><b>Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, New England Association of Schools and Colleges</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Founded in 1885</li> <li>• 250 post-secondary institutions</li> <li>• Geographic regions: CT, MA, ME, NH, RI, VT</li> </ul> <p>209 Burlington Road Bedford, MA 01730 Phone: 781-271-0022 Web site: <a href="http://www.neasc.org">www.neasc.org</a></p>	
<b>Official Documents</b>	<b>Date</b>
Handbook: <i>Standards for Accreditation</i>  <a href="http://www.neasc.org/cihe/standards_for_accreditation_2005.pdf">http://www.neasc.org/cihe/standards_for_accreditation_2005.pdf</a>	January  1, 2006
<i>Policy on Substantive Change</i>  <a href="http://www.neasc.org/cihe/substan.htm">http://www.neasc.org/cihe/substan.htm</a>	Nov.  2005
<i>Policy on the Review of Electronically Offered Degree Programs</i>  <a href="http://www.neasc.org/cihe/policy_electronically_offered_degree.htm">http://www.neasc.org/cihe/policy_electronically_offered_degree.htm</a>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This policy statement explains how distance education relates with substantive change. The document then refers institutions to two templates (the two next documents, Guidelines for Preparing Reports...) for reporting distance education activities.</li> </ul>	Adopted  3/1/01  Updated  11/03
<i>Guidelines for Preparing Reports on Existing Academic Programming Offered Through Distance Education</i>  <a href="http://www.neasc.org/cihe/guidelines_reports_distance_education.htm">http://www.neasc.org/cihe/guidelines_reports_distance_education.htm</a>	No date  provided
<i>Guidelines for Preparing Reports on the Establishment of Academic Programming Offered Through Distance Education</i>  <a href="http://www.neasc.org/cihe/guidelines_reports_establishment_distance_education.htm">http://www.neasc.org/cihe/guidelines_reports_establishment_distance_education.htm</a>	No date  provided

<p><i>Statement of Commitment</i></p> <p><a href="http://www.neasc.org/cihe/commitment_electronically_offered_degree.htm">http://www.neasc.org/cihe/commitment_electronically_offered_degree.htm</a></p>	<p>March 2001</p>
<p><i>Best Practices</i></p> <p><a href="http://www.neasc.org/cihe/best_practices_electronically_offered_degree.htm">http://www.neasc.org/cihe/best_practices_electronically_offered_degree.htm</a></p>	<p>March 2001</p>

In 2000, Flango described New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Commission on Institutions of Higher Education's (NEASC-CIHE) use and slight adaptation of the *Guidelines* (1997) document derived from the *Principles* (1995) document. He then wrote, "other than that, no separate guidelines were presented" (p. 20).

As of this writing and listed in Table 2 there are seven NEASC-CIHE publications with some relevance to distance education. This Commission has revised its Handbook and Policy on Substantive Change and then added to its repository five additional documents associated with their distance education programs. In addition to these distance education standards, NEASC-CIHE also has a brief (628 words) distance education policy (see *Policy on Substantive Change* above). This policy introduces and explains the use of the two *Guidelines* publications for institutions either preparing reports on existing distance education programs as part of the comprehensive evaluation or who are establishing distance education programs as part of the substantive change process. When reporting on new or existing programs the institution must provide a narrative report no longer than 20-pages (single-spaced) or 40-pages (double-spaced). This narrative report is intended to show institutional compliance with the following commission criteria that are each cross-referenced to the appropriate NEASC-CIHE standards and substandards in the *Standards for Accreditation*: (1) alignment with

institutional mission; (2) planning and evaluation; (3) organization; (4) educational programming; (5) faculty; (6) student services; (7) library and technological support, (8) dealing with applicants, students, and general public; and (9) contractual relationships.

Even though many of the nine criteria can be mapped against the *Best Practices* the commission's own policy has priority and it is the *Best Practices* that are cross-referenced to the commission policy and not the other way around. The Commission's two *Guidelines* documents describe what should be included in the 20-page (single-spaced) narrative and then give this suggestion relative to the *Best Practices*:

“Individuals preparing this section of the report are encouraged to consult the document *Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs*. Prepared jointly by the eight regional commissions, it provides an explication of how the well-established essentials of institutional quality found in regional accreditation standards are applicable to distance education” (Commission on Institutions of Higher Education: *Guidelines for Preparing Reports on the Establishment of Academic Programming Offered Through Distance Education*, 2007, ¶8).

The guidelines on preparing reports for either existing or newly established distance education programs are at the heart of the commission's evaluation of distance education programs. The commission's *substantive change* document references “distance education” two times; the first to establish that adding “courses or programs that represent a significant departure in terms of either the content or method . . . such as distance learning or correspondence courses” qualify as a “substantive change;” and the second as part of the “justification” section that requires the institution to show that they have adhered to the “Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Academic

Degree and Certificate Programs” (Commission on Institutions of Higher Education: Policy on Substantive Change, Nov. 2005). [The authors believe that the Commission really intends its institutions to use and show adherence to the updated (2001) *Best Practices* document which it lists on its Web site rather than the (1995) *Principles* document that it references in its substantive change document.]

Finally, Flango (2000) observed that NEASC-CIHE’s approach to evaluating new distance education programs was “identical in philosophy with NWCCU” (p. 21). While the authors now see all the Commissions giving similar attention to new and established distance education programs, they still see NEASC-CIHE and NWCCU being most alike in the level of detail used to identify what institutions with distance education programs will included as part of their self-study: NEASC-CIHE requires a report (no longer than 20 single-spaced pages) that specifically responds to nine criteria, and NWCCU a written response to 12 criteria—no specific page limits—with 25 supporting documents.

Table 3  
Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Founded in 1887</li> <li>• 511 institutions</li> <li>• Six states: DC, DE, MD, NJ, NY, PA</li> </ul> 3624 Market Street Philadelphia, PA 19104 Phone: 267-284-5000 Web: <a href="http://www.msche.org">www.msche.org</a>	
<b>Document</b>	<b>Dated</b>
Handbook: <i>Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education</i>  <a href="http://www.msche.org/publications/CHX06060320124919.pdf">http://www.msche.org/publications/CHX06060320124919.pdf</a>	2006
<i>Statement of Commitment and Best Practices</i>  <a href="http://www.msche.org/publications/distguide02050208135713.pdf">http://www.msche.org/publications/distguide02050208135713.pdf</a>	Adopted  March 2001

	Updated May 2002
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The Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) handbook was recently updated in 2006 with an explanation that the revisions from the 2002 handbook place “an emphasis on institutional assessment and assessment of student learning” and “acknowledge the diversity of educational delivery systems that enable institutions to meet accreditation standards.” The most relevant standard for distance educators is 13: “Related Educational Activities” with the subtitle “Institutional programs or activities that are characterized by particular content, focus, location, mode of delivery, or sponsorship meet appropriate standards” (MSCHE, 2006, p. 51). Oswald Ratteray, associate director of MSCHE, explained that although the specific text of Standard 13 first appeared in the 2002 handbook, the concepts for these standards have existed for decades with MSCHE. Ratteray explained that in the 2002 handbook, “Standard 13 pulled together disparate pieces and added clarifying and updating language.” For example, although the underlying concepts behind distance education have existed for many years, the specific terminology of “distance education” is new and has been added (personal communication, June 13, 2005).

The text for Standard 13 includes a large section on “Distance or Distributed Learning.” The introduction to this section explains, “Student learning objectives and outcomes should be consistent across comparable offerings, regardless of where or how they are provided.” The section then lists “Fundamental Elements,” which, according to the handbook, specify the particular characteristics that encompass the standard (MSCHE, 2006, p. 57).

MSCHE’s approach to evaluating distance education has changed in the past few years. In 2000, Flango described MSCHE as providing institutions with a “separate set of guidelines in a 10-page document that accompanies the WICHE Principles” (p.22). This document was known as the “Guidelines for Distance Learning Programs” (March 1997), developed by the Middle States Commission’s Task Force on Distance Learning. This document was replaced by MSCHE in March 2001 by the adoption of those same two documents, the *Statement* and *Best Practices*, which all six regional accrediting commissions agreed to embrace. These two documents have been combined by MSCHE into one document entitled “Distance Learning Programs: Interregional Guidelines for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs.” Rather than using separate policy documents related to distance education, MSCHE now simply uses the information within Standard 13 as well as the interregional guidelines.

Table 4

*North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA-HLC)*  
*The Higher Learning Commission*

<p><b>The Higher Learning Commission,  North Central Association of Colleges and Schools</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Founded in 1895</li> <li>• 1303 institutions</li> <li>• Nineteen states: AR, AZ, CO, IA, IL, IN, KS, MI, MN, MO, ND, NE, NM, OH, OK, SD, WI, WV, WY</li> </ul> <p>30 North LaSalle, Suite 2400  Chicago, IL 60602  Phone: 312-263-0456  Web: <a href="http://www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org">www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org</a></p>	
<b>Document</b>	<b>Date</b>
<p>Handbook: <i>Handbook of Accreditation</i></p> <p><a href="http://www.ncahlc.org/index.php?option=com_content&amp;task=view&amp;id=37&amp;Itemid=80">http://www.ncahlc.org/index.php?option=com_content&amp;task=view&amp;id=37&amp;Itemid=80</a></p>	<p>October 2003</p>



<p><i>Commission Policies</i></p> <p><a href="http://www.ncahlc.org/index.php?option=com_content&amp;task=view&amp;id=101&amp;Itemid=117">http://www.ncahlc.org/index.php?option=com_content&amp;task=view&amp;id=101&amp;Itemid=117</a></p>	January 2005
<p><i>Guidelines for Distance Education</i></p> <p><a href="http://www.ncahlc.org/index.php?option=com_content&amp;task=view&amp;id=37&amp;Itemid=116">http://www.ncahlc.org/index.php?option=com_content&amp;task=view&amp;id=37&amp;Itemid=116</a></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This document is the 1997 document adopted by all the regional accrediting commissions, but North Central is the only commission that still has this exact document on its website. It is based upon WICHE’s 1995 Principles of Good Practice.</li> </ul>	March 1997
<p><i>Statement of Commitment</i></p> <p><a href="http://www.ncahlc.org/download/CRAC_Statement_DEd.pdf">http://www.ncahlc.org/download/CRAC_Statement_DEd.pdf</a></p>	March 2001
<p><i>Best Practices</i></p> <p><a href="http://www.ncahlc.org/download/Best_Pract_DEd.pdf">http://www.ncahlc.org/download/Best_Pract_DEd.pdf</a></p>	March 2001

The standards in the North Central Association, Higher Learning Commission (NCA-HLC) handbook, *Handbook of Accreditation*, do not mention “distance education” or any related terms. This is understandable, due to the NCA-HLC (2003) handbook’s assertion: “An institutional accrediting body evaluates an entire organization and accredits it as a whole” (p.1.1-1).

Flango reported in his 2000 thesis, NCA-HLC “is adamant about not having a separate set of standards of any kind for a specific program” (p.19). Interviews in 2005 with NCA-HLC leaders show the same approach: “Regional accreditors evaluate and

accredit organizations/institutions—not individual programs or courses” (L. Nakutis, personal communication, February 17, 2005).

Table 5

*Commission on Colleges Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS)*

<p><b>Commission on Colleges, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Founded in 1895</li> <li>• 792 accredited institutions</li> <li>• Eleven states: AL, FL, GA, KY, LA, MS, NC, SC, TN, TX, VA</li> </ul> <p>1866 Southern Lane Decatur, GA 30033 Phone: 404-679-4500 Web: <a href="http://www.sacscoc.org">www.sacscoc.org</a></p>	
<p><b>Document</b></p>	<p><b>Date</b></p>
<p>Handbook: <i>Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement</i></p> <p><a href="http://www.sacscoc.org/pdf/2007%20Interim%20Principles%20complete.pdf">http://www.sacscoc.org/pdf/2007%20Interim%20Principles%20complete.pdf</a></p>	<p>January 2007 (interim version)</p>
<p><i>Substantive Change Policy Statement</i></p> <p><a href="http://www.sacscoc.org/pdf/081705/Substantive%20change%20policy.pdf">http://www.sacscoc.org/pdf/081705/Substantive%20change%20policy.pdf</a></p>	<p>January 2007</p>
<p><i>Distance Education Policy Statement</i></p> <p><a href="http://www.sacscoc.org/pdf/081705/distance%20education.pdf">http://www.sacscoc.org/pdf/081705/distance%20education.pdf</a></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This document is based on the 1997 document Guidelines for Distance Education adopted by all the regional accrediting commissions. This document is identical to the Guidelines except for minor changes in wording and then an addition to one standard under the Curriculum and Instruction category. The addition to the standard states, “expectations concerning the use</li> </ul>	<p>December 2006</p>

<p>of such technology are clearly communicated to students.” This document also deletes the “Evaluation and Assessment” heading in the Guidelines and instead fits those three standards into the Curriculum and Instruction heading.</p>	
<p><i>Best Practices</i> <a href="http://www.sacscoc.org/pdf/commadap.pdf">http://www.sacscoc.org/pdf/commadap.pdf</a></p>	<p>December 2000</p>

The four official publications for SACS that address distance education are the handbook (*Principles of Accreditation*), distance education policy statement, substantive change statement, and Best Practices document. The official handbook for SACS last updated in December 2001 is now, with Western, the most dated of the six Commission handbooks, and only one mention of each of the following phrases “distance education,” “distance learning,” and “delivery” was identified in the handbook.

The official “distance education policy statement” was first adopted in June 1997 and updated in December 2006. This one-and-a-half page document includes a brief “definition of distance education” statement and a Policy section that includes four criteria and the following three-sentence introductory statement: “Institutions must ensure that their distance 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 requirement of the *Principles* that apply to distance education. This policy applies to degree and certificate programs and their courses” (SACSCOC, 2006, p. 1).

The four criteria included in the Policy section and the number of sub-criteria included with each are: (1) Curriculum and Instruction—ten sub-criteria; (2) Library and

Learning Resources—three sub-criteria; (3) Student Services—four sub-criteria; and (4) Facilities and Finances—two sub-criteria. This distance education policy statement is based on the 1997 document *Guidelines for Distance Education* adopted by all the regional accrediting commissions. This SACS policy statement is identical to the *Guidelines* except for minor changes in wording and an addition to one of the standards under the Curriculum and Instruction category. The addition to the standard states, “expectations concerning the use of such technology are clearly communicated to students.” This policy also slightly differs from the *Guidelines* in that the “Evaluation and Assessment” heading in the *Guidelines* is not included in the SACS policy statement—instead, the standards from that heading are merely included under “Curriculum and Instruction.”

The present position of SACS is quite different from what was reported by Flango. He noted that “[SACS] is the only one out of the six that has very specific, separate standards for the evaluation of distance learning activities to ensure comparability to the traditional courses” (2000, pp. 18–19). Flango was likely referring to the specificity of the SACS document entitled “Planning Distance Learning Activities” used by SACS from December of 1992 until its discontinuance in 2001 when the current edition of the *Principles of Accreditation* was formalized. Furthermore, SACS also used the “Planning Distance Learning Activities” document, the earlier edition of the current policy, concurrently with “Planning Distance Learning Activities,” from June, 1997 until 2001. Clearly, SACS was overseeing its institution’s distance learning activities with “very specific, separate standards” (Flango, 2000, pp. 18–19) for this four-year period, 1997–2001.

In 2001, when the “Planning Distance Learning Activities” document was discontinued and the “Principles of Accreditation” handbook was updated, SACS made special effort to connect each of the “Distance Education Policy Statement” sub-criteria to one or more of the “core requirements” and “comprehensive standards” of the handbook. For example, one of the sub-criteria under “Curriculum and Instruction: Faculty who teach in distance education programs and courses receive appropriate training” was mapped to Comprehensive Standard (CS 3.7.3) (SACSCOC, 2006, p. 13). This effort and approach, as well as the discontinuance of the more specific requirements, demonstrates the integration of distance education programs into the greater whole of the institutional process of reaccreditation for those institutions in the SACS region.

Table 6

*Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)*

<b>Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Founded in 1917</li> <li>• 160 accredited institutions</li> <li>• Seven states: AK, ID, MT, NV, OR, UT, WA</li> </ul> 8060 165th Avenue, NE, Suite 100 Redmond, WA 98052 Phone: 425-558-4224 Web: <a href="http://www.nwccu.org">www.nwccu.org</a>	
<b>Document</b>	<b>Date</b>
Handbook: <i>Accreditation Handbook</i>  (includes Policy A-2 on substantive change and Standards 2.G and 2.H and Policy 2.6 on distance education)  <a href="http://www.nwccu.org/Pubs%20Forms%20and%20Updates/Publications/Accreditation%20Handbook%202003%20Edition%20Updated%20September%202005.pdf">http://www.nwccu.org/Pubs%20Forms%20and%20Updates/Publications/Accreditation%20Handbook%202003%20Edition%20Updated%20September%202005.pdf</a>	2003 edition,  updated July  1, 2005.

The NWCCU “Handbook” is the only commission handbook in which all distance education standards and policies are self-contained. The primary distance education documents in the Handbook are Standards 2.G, “Off-Campus and Other Special Programs Providing Academic Credit” and Policy 2.6, “Distance Delivery of Courses, Certificate, and Degree Programs.”

Policy 2.6 appears to be based on the earlier *Guidelines* document adopted by all the regional accrediting commissions in 1997—this document was replaced by the other five commissions in 2001 with the *Statement* and *Best Practices* documents. In comparing Policy 2.6 with the earlier *Guidelines* document it appears that the *Guidelines* wording has been retained but the order of criteria have been changed and three additional categories appended: “Approval and Purpose,” “Faculty Support,” and “Commitment to Support.” “Approval and Purpose” has two sub-criteria of which one seems to be based on the even earlier *Good Practice* (1995) document; “Faculty Support” has two sub-criteria which were repeated earlier in the document under “Curriculum and Instruction,” and “Commitment to Support” has one sub-criterion which appears to be derived from the earlier *Good Practice* (1995) document.

One other distinction belonging to NWCCU is that it is the only commission that identifies what an institution should supply as “supporting documentation to accompany its self-study and also be made available to the evaluation team. In Standard 2, “Educational Program and Its Effectiveness”—which includes Standard 2.G and Policy 2.6—concludes with a section entitled “Supporting Documentation for Standard Two: Continuing Education and Special Learning Activities.” This section lists three items

under “Required Documentation” and 13 under “Required Exhibits” that an institution with distance education programs is required to make available.

At the July 2006 meeting the Commission evaluated a new institutional evaluation model with the goal of having it available during the 2008 calendar year. The new model includes five elements: 1) Mission and Goals; 2) Resources and Capacity; 3) Planning and Implementation; 4) Effectiveness and Improvement; 5) Mission Fulfillment, Sustainability and Adaptation (NWCCU newsletter, 2006, p. 3). Table 7

*Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC-ACSCU) Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities*

<b>Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities, Western Association of Schools and Colleges</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Founded in 1962</li> <li>• 151 institutions</li> <li>• Two states: CA, HI and Pacific Basin</li> <li>• 985 Atlantic Avenue, Suite 100 Alameda, CA 94501 Phone: 510-748-9001 Web: <a href="http://www.wascsenior.org/wasc/">http://www.wascsenior.org/wasc/</a></li> </ul>	
<b>Document</b>	<b>Date</b>
Handbook: <i>Handbook of Accreditation</i>  <a href="http://www.wascsenior.org/wasc/Doc_Lib/2001%20Handbook.pdf">http://www.wascsenior.org/wasc/Doc_Lib/2001%20Handbook.pdf</a>	January  2001
<i>Substantive Change Manual</i>  <a href="http://www.wascsenior.org/wasc/Doc_Lib/2005SCManual.pdf">http://www.wascsenior.org/wasc/Doc_Lib/2005SCManual.pdf</a>	2005
<i>Statement of Commitment</i>  <a href="http://www.wascsenior.org/wasc/">http://www.wascsenior.org/wasc/</a>  <a href="http://www.wascsenior.org/wasc/Doc_Lib/StatementofCommitmentonDE.pdf">http://www.wascsenior.org/wasc/Doc_Lib/StatementofCommitmentonDE.pdf</a>	March  2001
<i>Good Practices</i>  <a href="http://www.wascweb.org/senior/GoodPracticesinDeD.pdf">http://www.wascweb.org/senior/GoodPracticesinDeD.pdf</a> ??	March  2001

The four documents that address distance education for Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) are the *Handbook of Accreditation, Substantive Change Manual, Statement of Commitment*, and *Good Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Program*. The handbook was last updated in 2001, making it one of the oldest handbooks of the regional accrediting commissions. The standards within this handbook mention distance education just three times but also indicates that the standard applies “regardless of mode of delivery,” and that it applies to “on-campus students and students enrolled at a distance” (WASC, 2001, p. 20, 26).

WASC has a brief policy entitled “Distance Education & Technology-Mediated Instruction” appended to the standards section of the handbook. These short paragraphs explain that new distance learning programs qualify for review by the Substantive Change Committee) and institutions can refer to the substantive change policy, in the handbook as well as the substantive change manual, found on the WASC website.

Western features “Distance Education” prominently in its “Resources” section on its Web site as one of five areas, i.e., Institutions, Evaluators, Substantive Change, Distance Education, and Visitors. After you click on “Distance Education” you are immediately directed to two documents that have been previously described earlier in this article as the “Statement of Commitment...” and the “Best Practices...” However, two intriguing differences exist: (1) Western has chosen to retain the earlier document name (1995), “Good Practices...” rather than the new document name “Best Practices...” even though the WASC document itself has been updated to the (2001) version that was adapted and adopted by all regional accrediting commissions from the original; (2) and parenthetically, the Commission writes that this “Good Practices...” document was



“previously titled: Guidebook on Distance and Technology—Mediated Education.” This nomenclature is different from the other five Commissions and is somewhat perplexing since it makes sense to retain the more familiar name “Good Practices” with an adapted document but not so if the name of the document will be changed anyway as indicated on the commission’s web site.

In Flango’s study Western reported to him that a “separate set of standards for distance education programs” had just been created and was called the “New Framework for Off-Campus and Substantive Change Proposals” (p. 21). After reviewing documents and interviewing one of the staff it was determined that a “separate set of standards” over and above those agreed upon in early 2001 by all six commissions had not been created (personal communication, June 10, 2005). Rather, Western formalized and strengthened its substantive change procedure for distance education programs including a “systems review” process by which institutions experienced in offering successful distance education programs would be granted exception from site visits every time an additional distance education program was added.

Western has not nor does it now single out distance education programs as part of an institutional review: distance education is expected to comply with all accreditation standards just as any other education program. Furthermore, Western does not prescribe distance education programs to provide predefined documents, exhibits, or suggested materials as part of the institutional review.

### Conclusion

One author observed that “accreditation is one (and perhaps the primary) means of quality control that can help providers of distance education realize their potential in

helping students maximize the benefits generated by this mode of delivery and learning” (Lindsay, 2006, p. 18). The six regional accrediting bodies have embraced common standards for those distance education programs within their geographical jurisdiction since the last comparative analysis was conducted. These commissions appear to be “well positioned to handle continued growth in distance learning” (CHEA, 2002, p. 15) even though differences exist in the use and administration of the review standards.

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