

ACCSCCT Alert!

Information for
our member schools

To: ACCSCT Accredited Institutions and Other Interested Parties
From: Elise Scanlon, Executive Director
Date: July 1, 2007
Subject: Amendments to the *Standards of Accreditation*

The Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges of Technology has reviewed all written comments submitted by accredited institutions and other interested parties regarding the revisions to the *Standards of Accreditation* as proposed in the Commission's March 27, 2007 *Call For Comment*. The Commission has subsequently voted to adopt the additions and revisions to the *Standards of Accreditation* in the following areas effective immediately:

- *Section IX, Distance Education, Substantive Standards, Standards of Accreditation*
- *Conforming Revisions to the Standards of Accreditation*

The full text of the Accreditation Alert and the fully revised *Standards of Accreditation* can be found on the Commission's website at: www.accsct.org. Go to "Accreditation" and then "Standards of Accreditation" and "Accreditation Alert." The revised *Standards of Accreditation* dated July 1, 2007 should be used to replace all previous versions.

Accredited institutions and others maintaining a complete and up-to-date copy of the *Standards of Accreditation* should add this notice to their current standards book under the *Accreditation Alerts* tab. For additional information related to these approved revisions, please contact Christopher D. Lambert, Associate Director of Commission Relations at (703)247-4516 or via email at clambert@accsct.org.

Revisions to Section IX, Distance Education, Substantive Standards, Standards of Accreditation

Rationale

ACCST first promulgated standards for assessing distance education in December of 1998. At that time, distance education was emerging as an increasingly important component of higher education and the higher education regulatory community was still grappling with questions about how to ensure quality for distance education modalities. Since that time, ACCST has worked hard to be a leader in distance-education accreditation and to be positioned as a reliable authority on quality in distance education programs of study.¹ To that end, ACCST has comprehensively reviewed its distance education standards and has elected to adopt the revisions outlined herein. The Commission believes that these revisions will help to ensure that distance education, as an educational delivery modality, provides the appropriate rigor and quality at ACCST accredited institutions.

ACCST Review of Distance Education

In the recent past there has been significant growth in distance education within higher education, including an increase in distance education initiatives put forth by ACCST-accredited institutions. Currently, 33 ACCST accredited institutions have received approval from the Commission to offer a program or course of study via distance education. In light of the increased interest among ACCST-accredited institutions to explore distance education activities, and given the recent revisions to federal distance education regulations, the Commission conducted a comprehensive review of its distance education standards to ensure that these standards remain valid and reliable indicators of educational quality and continue to promote enhanced opportunities for students. Moreover, through these revisions, the Commission has sought to reinforce its mission of establishing, sustaining, and enforcing valid standards and practices for all methods of educational delivery which contribute to the development of a highly trained and competitive workforce.

In April of 2006, the Commission reconstituted its Distance Education Advisory Committee (“DEAC”)² in order to provide an opportunity to gain greater insight into current distance education trends, activities, and initiatives. The Commission’s own standing committee on distance education, after significant collaboration with the DEAC, forwarded its comprehensive and substantive revisions to the full Commission for consideration. At its February 2007 meeting, the Commission voted to accept the recommendations of the Distance Education Committee, and to put forth a *Call for Comment*, soliciting feedback from the ACCST membership and other interested parties. The overall theme of these proposed revisions revolved around ensuring institutional accountability for distance education initiatives.

1 In December of 2000, ACCST appeared before the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (“NACIQI”) to present an interim report on the Commission’s accrediting activities in the area of distance education. At that meeting, NACIQI accepted ACCST’s interim report on distance education and recommended that distance education be included in the scope of ACCST’s recognition. This recommendation was formally accepted by the U.S. Secretary of Education following the NACIQI meeting. In March of 2004, the Commission adopted a Statement of Purpose for distance education, which set forth criteria for schools that offer distance education programs.

2 The DEAC consists of the following individuals: Michael P. Lambert, Executive Director of the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC); Matthew Schnittman, President of the eLearning Division at eCollege; and Dr. Joel English, Director of the On-Line Division at Tidewater Tech, an ACCST accredited institution.

At its May 2007 meeting, the Commission reviewed all written comments submitted by accredited institutions and other interested parties regarding the revisions to the *Standards of Accreditation* as proposed in the Commission's March 27, 2007 *Call For Comment*. The Commission subsequently voted to adopt the additions and revisions with modifications in the growth provision as proposed in the March 27, 2007 *Call for Comment*. A summary of the revisions follows:

- The section on distance education has been re-ordered and re-codified to coincide with the revisions set forth in the *Standards of Accreditation* dated March 15, 2007;
- The proposed distance education standards make explicit the need for distance education operations to be included as part of a school's institutional assessment and improvement activities;
- The Commission has attempted clarify expectations for faculty qualifications and preparation for teaching in a distance education program or course of study;
- The standards related to student services highlight the need for timely responses to student needs; and
- The Commission has included a growth provision to allow for monitoring of student enrollment in distance education programs.

To follow are the Commission's revised standards for the delivery of educational programs and courses of study using distance education methods.

SECTION IX – DISTANCE EDUCATION

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

This section sets forth the criteria under which the Commission will recognize programs or courses of study offered via distance education. Distance education, as defined by the Commission, is a formal process in which instruction within a program or course of study occurs when the student and instructor are not in the same location. Schools must ensure that only appropriate programs or courses of study are taught using distance education methodologies; that assessment measures are in place for admissions, student progress, and student achievement; and that appropriate resources and services are available to support student success. Distance education employs telecommunication or other technologies for the delivery of instruction, and may be synchronous or asynchronous in nature. Schools offering programs or courses of study via distance education must adhere to, and are responsible for, demonstrating compliance with accrediting standards as prescribed by this section, and elsewhere in the *Standards of Accreditation*. In accordance with the *Rules of Process and Procedure*, schools seeking to add or modify a distance education program or course of study must receive Commission approval prior to implementation. After a distance education program or course of study has been approved and included within a school's scope of accreditation, it will be subject to the normal monitoring mechanisms available to the Commission. Appropriate admissions criteria must be in place and adhered to, necessary resources and services must be available to support student success, and mechanisms must be in place to measure and support student achievement outcomes. Section IX provides specific guidance for the delivery of distance education. All other requirements outlined in the *Standards of Accreditation* apply.

A. Management and Administration

1. The school must have an appropriately qualified distance education administrator or team of administrators designated to knowledgeably and effectively oversee the school's distance education programs or courses of study, and to ensure that they meet the objectives and the mission of the school.
2. The school must demonstrate that it has the appropriate management, administrative capacity, and infrastructure to support the growth in a distance education program. The Commission will monitor student enrollment data for distance education programs on an annual basis to determine if the enrollments in an approved distance education program have experienced significant growth and to ensure that the school has maintained its ability to successfully administer, support, and manage its distance education activities.
3. The school retains responsibility for the quality of the programs and courses of study offered through distance education methods and the achievement of expected and acceptable outcomes, irrespective of any contractual arrangements, partnerships, or consortia entered into with third parties for the provision of components of a distance education program or course of study.
4. Institutional Assessment and Improvement Plan
 - a. The school's institutional assessment and improvement plan must ensure that sufficient facilities, equipment, technology, and other resources and infrastructure associated with distance education are appropriate to the subject matter of the program or courses of study, and are integrated in the long-term institutional assessment and improvement plan and budget of the school.
 - b. The school must directly review and is responsible for the currency and quality of all distance education components as part of its institutional assessment and improvement plan. The school's Institutional Assessment and Improvement Plan must meet all necessary requirements outlined in *Section I (B), Substantive Standards, Standards of Accreditation*.

B. Objectives and Student Achievement

1. The objectives of distance education programs and courses of study must be consistent with the mission of the school and its educational and training objectives, and must be readily available for student consideration.
2. Programs and courses of study must be appropriate for delivery through distance education methods and facilitate delivery of course content such that students may reasonably be expected to achieve the learning outcomes.
3. Observable, measurable, and achievable student performance outcomes must be identified so that programs or courses of study offered through distance education methods can be compared to programs or courses of study with similar subject matter and objectives, whether offered by distance education methods or residential means.
4. The school must specify the expected knowledge, skills, and competency levels that students will achieve in a distance education program or course of study, and such knowledge, skills and competency levels are equivalent to those expected from comparable programs or courses of study.
5. Graduation, employment and, where applicable, state licensing examination pass rates must be assessed in accordance with *Section VII (C), Substantive Standards, Standards of Accreditation*.

C. Programs, Curricula, and Resources

1. The length of the distance education programs and courses of study must meet all necessary requirements outlined in *Section II (A)(1), Substantive Standards, Standards of Accreditation*.
2. The school must demonstrate that the content and length of a distance education program or course of study are comparable to residential programs. The school must justify and provide validation for any deviation from established clock-to-credit hour conversions, if applicable.
3. The school must ensure that materials, programs, and courses of study are current and comprehensive, and undergo periodic review as part of the school's institutional assessment and improvement plan.
4. The programs and courses of study must provide for timely and meaningful interaction between students and faculty, and among students.
5. The school's learning resource system must meet all necessary requirements outlined in *Section II (A) (5), Substantive Standards, Standards of Accreditation*.
6. Program Advisory Committees for programs or courses of study offered via distance education must include an individual with experience in the delivery and administration of distance education who can review and comment on the institution's distance education platform, methods, processes, procedures, and infrastructure in the context of the program and courses of study content and objectives.
7. The school must establish and adhere to clear policies on ownership of instructional materials and protection of copyright.

D. Catalog and Advertising

1. The catalog and other publications must clearly describe distance education programs or courses of study, including the school's expectations of distance education students, admissions requirements, the prerequisites for participation, expected learning outcomes, graduation requirements, access to the learning resource system, student services, technology requirements, and any other requirements.
2. The catalog must meet all necessary requirements outlined in *Section IV (B)(1), Substantive Standards, Standards of Accreditation*.
3. All advertisements and promotional materials must meet all necessary requirements outlined in *Section IV (D), Substantive Standards, Standards of Accreditation* and ACCSCT's *Advertising of Accredited Status Form*.

E. Admissions Requirements and Enrollment

1. The school must demonstrate compliance with *Section V, Substantive Standards, Standards of Accreditation* and must be able to document that students admitted into distance education programs or courses of study met the school's admissions criteria.
2. The school must establish admission requirements for distance education programs and courses of study that assess whether students have the skills, competencies, and access to technology necessary to succeed in a distance education environment prior to their enrollment in the program or course of study.

F. Faculty

1. The school must employ faculty who have the qualifications and the experience to teach using distance education methods. Faculty teaching in distance education programs must meet the appropriate requirements set forth in *Section III (B), Substantive Standards, Standards of Accreditation*.
2. The school must provide orientation and training for faculty in accordance with *Section III (B)(4), Substantive Standards, Standards of Accreditation*, which specifically addresses teaching skills and instructional methods in a distance education environment.
3. The institution must have clear, consistent policies, measures, and procedures to evaluate the performance and needs of faculty members, and to assess faculty effectiveness in distance education programs or courses of study.
4. The school must ensure that faculty provide opportunities and means for timely and meaningful interaction with students appropriate to the learning environment.
5. The school must develop policies addressing teaching load (inclusive of residential and distance education), class size, time needed for course development, and the sharing of instructional responsibilities that allow for effective teaching in a distance education environment.

G. Student Services

1. Student services must be made available to students enrolled in distance education programs or courses of study in accordance with *Section VI, Substantive Standards, Standards of Accreditation*. The school must ensure that there is adequate supervision of its student services for students enrolled in a distance education program or course of study.
2. The school must provide orientation to the distance education environment for students enrolled in distance education programs or courses of study.
3. The school must ensure that faculty and staff respond in a timely manner to student questions and concerns, both academic and administrative.

Conforming Revisions to the *Standards of Accreditation*

Program Advisory Committees:

In accordance with the provisions set forth in the March 15, 2007 Accreditation Alert, effective July 1, 2007 the Commission's standards for Program Advisory Committees are in full effect.

Accreditation Fees:

In accordance with the provisions set forth in the March 15, 2007 Accreditation Alert, effective July 1, 2007 the Commission will apply a pass-through fee for stipends to be paid to its volunteer Education Specialists in the amount of \$175.00 per day/review.

Change of Ownership and Separate Facilities:

Section IV (E)(2)(p)(iii), Rules of Process and Procedure, Standards of Accreditation has been revised to state the following in accordance with language established in a March 17, 2004 Accreditation Alert:

A main school may not apply for accreditation of a branch campus within one year following the Commission's recognition of a transfer of accreditation resulting from the change of control, unless the main school can show good cause why it should be allowed to apply for a branch campus in a shorter time frame.

Student Achievement:

Section VII (C)(2)(b), Substantive Standards, Standards of Accreditation has been revised to state the following in accordance with language established in a February 16, 2007 Accreditation Alert:

A school whose graduation or employment rate falls below the Commission's required rates may still demonstrate with supporting documentation the successful achievement of its students by taking into account economic conditions, location, student population served, length of program, students who withdraw from training but still obtain employment, state requirements, and other external or mitigating factors reasonably related to student achievement.