



COMMUNITY COLLEGE  
OF RHODE ISLAND

## Distance Learning Policy

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### BACKGROUND:

The Distance Learning Advisory Committee was created in June 2004 and was charged by the Vice President for Academic Affairs to examine and recommend institutional policies and practices for developing, planning, evaluating and implementing distance /distributed offerings with a focus on quality and connection to the mission of the institution. This policy was drafted based on the recommendations resulting from four years of work by the CCRI Distance Learning Advisory Committee (DLAC) and is subject to any distance learning guidelines, policies or regulations established by the Rhode Island Board of Governors for Higher Education.

### POLICY STATEMENT:

CCRI utilizes instructional technology tools to develop alternative distance course programming to increase access to education, to provide flexibility in scheduling to accommodate diverse needs, and to expose students to many different ways to pursue lifelong learning. The following procedures should be adhered to for distance learning courses to ensure consistency and quality in these offerings.

### DEFINITIONS:

**Distance Learning (DL)** at its most basic level takes place when teachers and students are separated by physical distance and/or time. Distance learning options make it easy and convenient for students to take classes even if the student can't get to campus. These courses contain the same content as the on-campus offerings but are often available in an anytime-anywhere format. At CCRI, there are currently two course formats available through asynchronous distance learning, one synchronous format and a blended format.

#### **Asynchronous Course Formats:**

**Online web-based courses** deliver content and communicate completely via the Internet, usually through the Blackboard Learning System course management system, but in some cases on remote sites hosted by publishers. Students are expected to have access to an Internet-connected computer and basic technical skills.

**Telecourses** combine content broadcast over cable television with communication via Pipeline, CCRI's portal application, or Blackboard Learning System. Most courses consist of two 30-minute programs shown in a one-hour block each week and are repeated later in the week. Students are expected to be cable TV subscribers and have basic e-mail skills.

#### **Synchronous Course Format**

Interactive two-way **video conferencing courses** are offered either intra-campus or inter-campus which makes it possible to take an on-campus course at the campus of one's choice. In this model the instructor often alternates between two campuses to deliver live instruction on one campus while simultaneously communicating via video conferencing with the remote campus. Some courses may also involve video conferencing between institutions.

### **Blended Course Format**

**Blended, or hybrid, courses** (in the context of distance learning) combine primarily online content delivery with a limited number of on-campus meetings. It is expected that faculty clearly state the required on-campus time expected of students in the course requirements.

## **PROCEDURES:**

### **Class Size**

The first time an instructor teaches a fully online course the class size is limited to 15 students. The experience of teaching online is quite different than the traditional process and faculty need time to make the necessary adjustments for their first online course. Subsequent offerings will be capped at approximately 20 students, depending on the course.

A synchronous interactive two-way video conferenced course size would be set by department chairpersons based on the combined students from each campus.

Department chairs must notify Enrollment Services of class size and distance status of courses (web-based, hybrid, synchronous, asynchronous) when submitting information for the master schedule. Any mandatory on-campus meetings or special requirements for courses (software, hardware, etc.) should also be included.

### **Distance Experience**

A faculty member must have at least one semester's experience with a web-based learning management system, preferably Blackboard Learning System (formerly known as WebCT), prior to offering a class online.

Familiarity with a course management tool is necessary to manage student interaction, assessment and assistance successfully. The licensed and supported product at CCRI is Blackboard Learning System. The majority of CCRI fully online courses are currently using this software therefore it is the preferred tool in order to maximize consistency and minimize distance students' learning curves and confusion. The IT Staff provides training and support for Blackboard Learning System. Some faculty currently use other courseware management systems with our students and may apply their experience with these tools to their online courses instead. The major concern is that all courses contain the same basic components that comprise a quality online course and provide similar tools for student learning and interaction as detailed in the section on exemplary course standards.

Department Chairs must be aware of the technological needs for offering a distance course and should verify the faculty member's experience before assigning any distance learning classes. Prospective online faculty should contact Information Technology support staff to set up course shells and familiarize themselves with the course management tools utilizing resources provided on the Department of Information Technology website.

### **Distance Pedagogy Preparation**

Faculty teaching at a distance must develop familiarity with distance pedagogy prior to teaching their first course in this modality. Faculty interested in transitioning to distance

teaching must complete the short course on online pedagogy developed by the DLAC prior to teaching their first distance course. This short course will be offered in a fully online format at specified times during the year. The course will provide an overview of what constitutes “quality” online courses, including the unique demands on faculty in regard to instructional design, the creation of a virtual community, and assessment. All of the basic components of a quality online course will be incorporated into this course in order to emulate best practices. In addition, templates will be developed utilizing principles of good practice to pave the way for faculty to easily apply online pedagogy.

### **Two-Semester Commitment**

Faculty agreeing to teach a distance course will commit to doing so for a minimum of two semesters. If a faculty member decides that this environment is not comfortable for him or her, the department chair will have the extra semester to find and train a replacement while allowing the program some continuity. Similarly, it is preferable for a department to allow a faculty member who has worked on developing a fully online course to teach that course for two or three semesters in order to gain experience, refine the course and, perhaps, make it part of the College’s regular offerings.

Although department chairs contractually can assign anyone he or she thinks is appropriate to teach a course section, consideration should be given to the time commitment necessary to develop an online course when assigning courses.

### **Identifying course delivery method**

Alternative distance delivery of courses should be clearly identified in advance for students in the course bulletin and on the Available Courses website with a key available to let students know what to expect related to course delivery format and initial contact with instructor.

Department chairs, Enrollment Services staff, and Public Relations staff involved in production of course marketing materials will use the agreed upon designations that distinguish fully online web-based courses, telecourses, interactive video conferencing courses and blended (hybrid) courses from traditional formats on all publication media. Prospective DL Faculty will inform department chairs of the format intended for the distance learning offering and any special requirements or on-campus meetings that would be posted in the syllabus.

### **Exemplary Course Standards**

CCRI will establish, publish and encourage best practices for exemplary online courses based on research and past experience. Contractually, department chairs are responsible for monitoring the quality of any course regardless of delivery method. Online, anonymous post-course student evaluations will be administered to guide improvement of all distance courses. This evaluation will measure the same learning outcomes as traditional sections of a course but also include assessment of the unique methodology to provide feedback to the faculty member. Without regard to whether a particular distance learning course resides on CCRI’s in-house course management system or resides on a third-party server, the Vice President for Academic Affairs (and his/her designee), the relevant department chair (and his/her designee) and the distance learning coordinator shall have the same access to that course and its materials as any registered student. As between CCRI and the relevant faculty member, the CCRI Intellectual Property Policy governs the rights to and interests in any intellectual property included in that course or those materials.

Based on research of best practices for distance course instruction and delivery the following basic components should be included in all distance courses:

1. Web access to course syllabi with course requirements at least two weeks prior to the start of class. Faculty could use Blackboard Learning System information pages, or links from either the Distance Education course pages or the Available Courses pages to distribute this information before students access the course. Faculty could also provide this information on their Pipeline course pages for registered students.
2. For online and blended courses access to the course website is provided at least one week prior (whenever possible) to the start of class so that students can log in and verify their browser settings and download any plug-ins in readiness for the beginning of classes
3. Introductory information will be sent out at least a week in advance to provide students with the instructions for accessing the course, any special requirements (such as access codes with textbooks, necessary software, etc.) Advertising for on-campus orientations or mandatory meetings would also be sent with this information if the instructor chooses to offer them. Since courses are offered at a distance, there is no institutional requirement to offer an on-campus orientation; this is strictly up to the instructor's preference. Faculty can use the Pipeline course e-mail to distribute this introductory information to their registered students or send it via postal mail.
4. Regardless of delivery method (traditional or alternative), the same learning objectives and outcomes assessment will be applied to all sections of a course
5. Procedures for monitoring and assessing student performance equivalent to those used in on-campus sections will be applied. Criteria for student success must be at least as rigorous and comprehensive as on-campus courses.
6. Timely feedback to students regarding their progress and performance will be equivalent to those used in on-campus credit courses.
7. Opportunities for interaction, both student-to-student and student-to-faculty will be built in to all distance courses so that students can experience a sense of community and receive prompt responses to their questions.
8. Administer online, anonymous post-course student evaluations to guide improvement of all distance courses. This evaluation should measure the same learning outcomes as traditional sections of a course but also include assessment of the unique methodology to provide feedback to the faculty member.
9. Distance courses will adhere to the CCRI's Copyright Policies.

### **Distance Learning Programming Development**

Services and offerings associated with Distance Learning are coordinated by a distance learning coordinator reporting to the Vice President of Academic Affairs. This coordinator will oversee the growth of distance programming and provide administrative coordination of student services such as: advising and counseling, bookstore, library resources, and accommodations assistance as well as technology support services for students and faculty that access courses 24/7. The coordinator will also conduct ongoing research on emerging technologies that may be adapted for additional delivery strategies. This position provides a single point of contact for distance students and faculty in supporting and growing distance education, acting as liaison and advocate between students who cannot come to campus and all the different services at the College. Reminders will be sent to distance faculty and department chairpersons by the distance learning coordinator at key times during the year on deadlines and action steps

CCRI's Department of Academic Affairs will provide an ongoing analysis of current course offerings and identify what areas are of most interest to students in building distance

programming and work with department chairs and faculty to develop those courses that are most in demand. This department will also develop strategies to encourage faculty members to participate in distance instruction at the institution.

**POLICY APPLIES TO:**

CCRI students, faculty and staff who participate in distance learning.

**EXCEPTIONS:**

**RESPONSIBLE DEPARTMENT:**

This Policy will be reviewed annually by the Distance Learning Committee. Any recommended adjustments or changes will be subject to approval by the Vice President for Academic Affairs and the President's Council.

**ADDITIONAL AUTHORITY:**

**RELATED POLICIES:**

CCRI Intellectual Property Policy and CCRI's Copyright Policies.

**APPROVED BY:**

**President's Council on September 10, 2008**  
**Department Chairs Council on September 9, 2008**