



**NEW ENGLAND ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES  
COMMISSION ON INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

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**Policy on the  
Review of Electronically Offered Degree Programs**

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Recent years have seen the emergence and increased application of new technologies for instruction by member colleges and universities. While evolving electronic media have had an impact in a number of areas, of particular interest to the Commission has been the establishment of technologically based education programs offered to students at a distance. These initiatives have enhanced the capacity of many institutions to meet the needs of more students, but the nature of the new delivery systems has also introduced challenges for institutions and the Commission alike.

This policy statement has been developed to help meet those challenges. Its purposes are two fold:

1. to assist and otherwise encourage institutions to self-assess and improve the quality of their distance education activities and;
2. to provide a basis for the Commission's public assurance about the quality of distance education programming offered by its affiliated colleges and universities in keeping with the policy on substantive change.

*It is applicable to affiliated institutions which offer 50% or more of a degree program through technologically mediated instruction to students at a distance and degree completion programs offered on-line. It is not meant to encompass on-line courses offered outside the context of a predominantly on-line degree program, nor technologically mediated instruction provided to campus based students.*

**Commission Review**

Distance education programming, which meets the above definition and is undertaken by *an institution for the first time* is not automatically included within the institution's accreditation; it represents a substantive change (see the Commission's Policy on Substantive Change). The following procedures must be completed before such activities are included within the scope of the institution's accreditation by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges.

It is recognized that some institutions are currently offering distance education programming leading to degrees which have not been reviewed by the Commission at the time of this policy's adoption. In such cases, the Commission, seeking to provide quality assurance consistently among its institutions, will ask to similarly review these pre-existing activities.

#### *Notice to the Commission*

It is the responsibility of an institution to notify the Commission about its intention to inaugurate distance education programming encompassed by this policy prior to the program being initiated and to provide a report about its plans for the projected activity. Institutions already engaged in distance education will also be asked to submit a report. The report should demonstrate that these activities fulfill the *Standards for Accreditation* with particular regard to:

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| 1. institutional mission;   | 4. faculty, library, student services,<br>and technological support; |
| 2. planning and evaluation; | 5. contractual relationships.  |
| 3. educational programming; |  |

For assistance in developing its report, the institution should follow the directions in "Guidelines for Preparing Reports on the Establishment of Academic Programming Offered Through Distance Education," when reporting on the first-time initiation of distance education activities or "Guidelines for Preparing Reports on Existing Academic Programming Offered Through Distance Education," when reporting on distance education activities currently offered by the institution.

#### *Review Processes*

The institutional report will be reviewed by the Commission at its next regularly scheduled meeting following the report's receipt. The range of possible actions include approval of the report and inclusion of the activity in the institution's accreditation and specification of future monitoring if necessary; deferral of action; and rejection of the report. The institution will be notified of the action taken shortly after the Commission meets.

#### *Ongoing Monitoring*

As a part of the fifth-year interim report required of all colleges and universities on a ten-year evaluation cycle, the institution is expected to apprise the Commission of any significant developments regarding its distance education programming as outlined in the relevant procedural document on fifth-year reports.

Distance education activities will be specifically reviewed through the comprehensive evaluation. The institution is expected to appropriately address such activities in its self-study report.

*March 1, 2001  
November 2003*