

CMU Distance Education Modalities + Compliance with Department of Education Regulatory Requirements for Distance Education Courses

Memo for CMU Faculty & Instructors of Record

Effective July 1, 2021

Overview

This memo provides information to CMU faculty and instructors of record on meeting current Department of Education (“DoE”) regulatory requirements for distance education (“DE”) courses as a result of amendments to key definitions involving distance education in those regulations that are effective July 1, 2021, including documenting the methods of “regular and substantive interaction” occurring between instructors and students who are participating in DE coursework at CMU. Key definitions in the DoE regulations that are referred to in this memo can be found at 34 CFR § 600.2.

Definition of “Distance Education”

Distance education (or DE) means education that uses one or more technologies to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the **instructor** and to support **regular and substantive interaction** between the students and the **instructor**, either synchronously or asynchronously.

Consistent with the foregoing [as well as the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)], CMU courses offered in these modalities meet the definition of distance education:

- **REO: Remote only.** Delivered remotely via technology. ***Because students complete all instruction remotely, REO is considered DE.***
- **IPR: In-Person + Remote.** Uses a combined approach of in-person attendance (such as in a classroom) and remote technology. Students may choose to attend in-person or remotely during the course’s scheduled meeting time. ***Because students may choose to complete all instruction remotely, IPR is considered DE.***
- **IRR: In-Person (Rotation) + Remote.** Uses a combined approach of remote technology and rotating in-person attendance (e.g., if a course meets on MW, some attend in-person on M and remotely on W, while others attend remotely on M and in-person on W). Students may choose to attend in-person or remotely during the course’s scheduled meeting time. ***Because students may choose to complete all instruction remotely, IRR is considered DE.***

Distance education (DE) instructional modality is assigned at the CMU course and/or section-level, and indicated in the Student Services Suite (S3), CMU’s student information system.

Definition of “Regular and Substantive Interaction”

Substantive Interaction means engaging students in teaching, learning, and assessment, consistent with the course content, and also **includes at least two** of the following:

- Providing direct instruction;
- Assessing or providing feedback on a student's coursework;
- Providing information or responding to questions about the content of a course or competency;
- Facilitating a group discussion regarding the content of a course or competency; or
- Other instructional activities approved by the institution's or program's accrediting agency.

Regular Interaction means

- **providing the opportunity for substantive interactions with the student** on a *predictable and scheduled basis* commensurate with the length of time and the amount of content in the course or competency; and
- **monitoring the student's academic engagement and success** and promptly and proactively engaging in substantive interaction with the student *when needed* on the basis of such monitoring, or upon request by the student.

Important note about monitoring the student's academic engagement and success as part of regular interaction: The DoE commentary accompanying the July 1, 2021 effective date key definition changes to the DoE regulations indicates that the requirement to interact *when needed* on the basis of monitoring of a student's academic engagement and success is not intended to require that instructors personally monitor each student's engagement throughout each class session while also instructing, facilitating discussion, or responding to questions from students. Instead, the requirement is intended to ensure that instructors are generally monitoring whether a student is engaged and successful throughout a given course or competency and take appropriate action as needed. Per the commentary, such monitoring could include:

- evaluating a student's level of participation in synchronous class sessions;
- monitoring the student's activity on course websites or materials;
- considering the quality of the student's assignments or responses to questions about course materials;
- evaluating the level of the student's understanding of course materials during conversations or performance on exams; or
- other forms of monitoring the student's engagement and success in the course or competency.

Important note about Regular and Substantive Interaction, and correspondence courses: Education that uses one or more technologies to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and that lacks regular and substantive interaction

between the students and the instructor is a **correspondence course**. According to the DoE regulations, a correspondence course is:

“...a course provided by an institution under which the institution provides instructional materials, by mail or electronic transmission, including examinations on the materials, to students who are separated from the instructor. For a correspondence course, **interaction between the instructor and student is limited, is not regular and substantive, and is primarily initiated by the student**. Correspondence courses are typically self-paced.”

CMU does not offer correspondence courses, and is not authorized by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) to offer such courses.

Definition of “Instructor”

Instructor means “an individual responsible for delivering course content and who meets the qualifications for instruction established by an institution's accrediting agency.”

Consistent with the foregoing, at CMU, an “instructor” for a course is the “instructor of record” in the S3 system for the course.

Instructors are responsible for meeting the regular and substantive interaction requirements for DE courses and may do so by (i) meeting the requirements themselves, (ii) relying on the assistance of (undergraduate and graduate) TA's or other instructional staff to help them meet these requirements, as long as the assisting TA's/instructional staff meet the qualifications of instructors established by the university's accrediting body (MSCHE) (see [Standards for Accreditation and Requirements of Affiliation](#)):

- appropriate professionals who offer rigorous and effective teaching, assessment of student learning, scholarly inquiry, and service
- qualified for the positions they hold;
- provided with – and utilize – opportunities, resources, and support for professional growth and innovation;
- reviewed regularly and equitably based on written, disseminated, clear, and fair criteria, expectations, policies, and procedures.

Documentation Requirements for “Regular and Substantive Interaction”

At CMU, the methods for achieving “regular and substantive interaction” for each DE course must be documented (to, among other things, support Title IV aid eligibility) using a standard set of documentation methods:

- A completed compliance matrix documenting how the DE course or section meets the regular and substantive interaction requirements.
- The course syllabi (which should also be uploaded into the Eberly Center's Syllabi Registry at www.cmu.edu/teaching/syllabusregistry)

- The S3 Course Profile
 - Assessments Structure [How will students be assessed in the course? (i.e., assignments, exams, final exam, presentation, project)]
 - Learning Resources [Which resources will be available for students? (i.e., websites, learning applications, texts, case studies)]
 - Extra Time Commitments [Will students have extra time commitments for the course that are required outside of the regularly scheduled course meeting times?]

CMU's University Registrar's Office will provide a compliance matrix for each DE course to be provided during a semester that must be completed before the start of the semester. The matrix will include standard pedagogical methods that address the regular and substantive interaction requirements, and instructors may also add their other methods of academic engagement to be used during the DE course. Instructors or department coordinators will complete the matrix for REO, IPR and IPP courses. Information submitted on the form will be used for DoE (and/or other accreditation related) audit purposes. That said, auditors could request or require additional substantiation at the course level during an audit, and the instructor could be contacted to provide this additional substantiation in such instances.

Contact Information for Questions

For questions about these regulatory requirements, contact:

Brian Hill, Director of Student Financial Services (brianhill@cmu.edu)

For questions about teaching strategies referenced in these regulatory requirements, contact:

Eberly Center (eberly-assist@andrew.cmu.edu)