



Protocol for Distance Education Review

ACCJC offers the following resources to support institutions in improving the quality of distance education (DE), as well as facilitate an effective review process by the peer review team:

- 1) *Quality Continuum Rubric for Distance Education*
- 2) *Addendum to the Protocol for Distance Education Review*
- 3) *DE Assessment Tool for Peer Reviewers*
- 4) *Frequently asked questions by institutions undergoing evaluation and team members reviewing the quality of distance education*

These resources are currently available in Appendix B of the [Accreditation Handbook](#) and on the ACCJC website at: <https://accjc.org/accreditation-handbook-and-report-templates/>.

The Commission's [Policy on Distance Education and on Correspondence Education](#) (in compliance with federal regulation [34 CFR § 602.3](#)) specifies that all learning opportunities provided by accredited institutions must have equivalent quality, accountability, and focus on student outcomes, regardless of mode of delivery. ACCJC's protocol for reviewing distance education, outlined below, aligns with this policy and helps verify the ongoing commitment to academic quality and continuous improvement in an online modality using consistent procedures for each review.

Guidelines for Institutions: Preparing for Review

In preparation for distance education review, prepare a random sample of credit-bearing distance education courses for review. Use the following criteria to prepare the sample:

- Courses in the sample should be 100% online, that is, *ALL of their instructional portions* can be completed by distance education (i.e., exclude hybrid sections). Non-instructional in-person requirements (e.g., orientation and testing) do not exclude a course or program from being classified as exclusively distance education.
- Indicate whether the individual sections in the sample were offered synchronously or asynchronously.
- All sections in the sample should be from the semester, quarter, or term immediately preceding the date of the review. For example: if the review is in fall 2026, the sample courses must be from spring 2026.
- The sample should include 5% of the total number of distance education sections offered in the sample semester but should contain a **minimum of 15 sections and a maximum of 50 sections**.

Once the sample has been prepared, work with the team chair to provide the peer review team with access to the sample. The team will review each section in the sample for evidence of regular and substantive interaction, as defined in the *Policy on Distance Education and on Correspondence Education*, and in accordance with ACCJC's *Quality Continuum Rubric for Distance Education* and *Addendum to the Protocol for Distance Education Review*.

Reviewers should have a level of access to the LMS (typically 'instructor' level) that allows them to observe activities where this interaction takes place, such as on discussion boards, other postings, and communications regarding learning content, feedback on assignments, etc. It is the institution's responsibility to provide any additional access to relevant documentation to verify regular and substantive interaction.

Because the team members are focused on archived courses from a previous semester, they will not be interfering with instruction or course design, and they are not evaluating individual instructors. Institutions should expect peer review team members to maintain confidentiality of student and instructor information in accordance with the Commission's [Policy on Public Disclosure and Confidentiality in the Accreditation Process](#) at all times.

Guidelines for Peer Reviewers: Conducting the Review

As part of the comprehensive review process, the team chair assigns one or two team members to conduct the distance education review. The team chair will work with the institution to ensure that these reviewers have access to a sample of archived courses from the most recently completed semester, quarter, or term (see above).

Reviewers will access the sample and utilize the resources provided by ACCJC to evaluate the degree to which regular and substantive interaction between instructors and students occurs within the institution's distance education offerings and determine whether 85% of the courses reviewed demonstrated regular and substantive interaction. The resources include: 1) Quality Continuum Rubric for Distance Education, 2) Addendum to the Protocol for Distance Education Review, and 3) DE Assessment Tool for Peer Reviewers.

The distance education review should be completed prior to the team ISER review in order to allow for the development of core inquiries, if needed.

Framing of the core inquiries should be based on the careful consideration of context and potential themes emerging from the review of the ISER and linked to Accreditation Standards where relevant. For example:

- What professional development does the institution offer to faculty around teaching and learning? Do these offerings include support for online modalities? (Standard 3.2)
- How are expectations regarding academic breadth, depth, and rigor generally communicated? Are definitions and expectations for regular and substantive interaction included in these communications? (Standard 2.1)
- What provisions does the institution have in place to ensure its courses meet students' needs and support equitable success? Are there considerations for instructional modality in these provisions? (Standard 2.6)
- How does the institution review its educational offerings to ensure that quality is maintained? Are there considerations for distance education courses within these review processes? (Standard 2.9)

Consideration of the broader context will help the team develop thoughtful core inquiries and prompt institutional reflection in preparation for the focused site visit. During the subsequent focused site visit, the reviewers will have an opportunity to further triangulate their findings through a second sample and interviews with faculty, students, and/or managers/administrators.