



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

To ensure consistent, fair, and evidence-based evaluation of distance education (DE) courses, the Commission has revised its procedures for sampling credit-bearing distance education offerings during accreditation reviews. These procedures are designed to support formative feedback, ensure alignment with federal regulations, and apply escalating levels of review only when warranted by evidence.

Overview of the Sampling Approach

The revised approach uses randomized sampling, clearly defined thresholds, and graduated confidence intervals to balance institutional burden with regulatory accountability. The process includes two potential stages of review: a formative review during the Team ISER Review and, if necessary, a summative review during a Focused Site Visit.

Purpose and Principles

These procedures are grounded in the Commission's commitment to:

- Consistency and fairness across institutions
- Transparency in evaluation methods
- Evidence-based decision making
- Alignment with federal regulatory expectations
- A risk-based response, ensuring more intensive review occurs only when supported by data

By combining randomized sampling, confidence-based thresholds, and a staged review process, the Commission seeks to promote institutional improvement while fulfilling its oversight responsibilities with integrity and clarity.

Initial Sample: Team ISER Review (Formative)

Prior to the Team ISER Review, the institution will provide the Commission with a comprehensive list of all credit-bearing distance education courses offered during the relevant review period.

- Courses in the list 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 list were offered synchronously or asynchronously.
- All sections in the list should be from the semester, quarter, or term immediately preceding the date of the review. For example: if the review is in fall 2027, the list of courses must be from spring 2027.
- The Team Chair will generate a random sample of courses from this list using a random number-generating tool and work with the college to provide team members with access to the sample.
- The size of the sample will be determined using a 90% confidence interval table, which is provided below as part of this protocol.

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.

The evaluation team will review the sampled courses to assess compliance with applicable federal distance education regulations, including requirements related to 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*.

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.

This initial review is formative in nature and intended to identify patterns of compliance or concern.

Sample Size Table — 90% Confidence Interval

Total Courses	Sample Size (n)	Minimum % of Courses
0–49	29	59.2%
50–99	41	41.4%
100–199	51	25.6%
200–299	56	18.7%
300–399	58	14.5%
400–499	60	12.0%
500–599	61	10.2%
600–699	62	8.9%
700–799	63	7.9%
800–899	63	7.0%
900–999	64	6.4%
1000–1099	64	5.8%
1100–1199	65	5.4%
1200–1299	65	5.0%
1300–1399	65	4.6%
1400–1499	65	4.3%
1500–1599	65	4.1%
1600–1699	66	3.9%
1700–1799	66	3.7%
1800–1899	66	3.5%
1900–2000	66	3.3%

If 85% or more of the sampled courses are found to be in compliance with federal regulations, no further sampling is required, and the team will not pursue additional action related to distance education compliance.

Threshold for Additional Review

If fewer than 85% of the sampled courses meet federal requirements, the team will document its concerns through a Core Inquiry, signaling the need for further examination.

Second Sample: Focused Site Visit (Summative)

When a Core Inquiry is issued, the institution will provide a second list of all credit-bearing distance education courses, updated as appropriate.

- The Team Chair will again generate a random sample from this list using a random number generating tool.
- The size of the second sample will be determined using a 95% confidence interval table, reflecting the summative nature of this review.
- The team will evaluate the sampled courses leading up to and during the Focused Site Visit to determine whether the institution demonstrates compliance at the required level.

Sample Size Table — 95% Confidence Interval

Total Courses	Sample Size (n)	Minimum % of Courses
0–49	33	67.3%
50–99	49	49.5%
100–199	65	32.7%
200–299	73	24.4%
300–399	78	19.5%
400–499	81	16.2%
500–599	83	13.9%
600–699	85	12.2%
700–799	86	10.8%
800–899	87	9.7%
900–999	88	8.8%
1000–1099	89	8.1%
1100–1199	89	7.4%
1200–1299	90	6.9%
1300–1399	90	6.4%
1400–1499	91	6.1%
1500–1599	91	5.7%
1600–1699	91	5.4%
1700–1799	92	5.1%
1800–1899	92	4.8%
1900–2000	92	4.6%

Compliance Determination

If, following the summative review, 85% or more of the sampled courses are found to conform to federal regulations, the matter will be considered resolved.

If fewer than 85% of the sampled courses meet federal requirements, the team will develop a compliance recommendation for Commission consideration and action.

When Commission action requires a follow-up visit, the institution will provide an updated list of all credit-bearing distance education courses, which will be re-sampled at the 95% confidence interval and evaluated by the team for compliance.

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.