



Policy Directory

Responsible Division: Academic Affairs
Responsible Office: Academic Affairs
Issue/Revision Date: 12/01/2017

Online Learning Programs Policy

Policy:

This policy clarifies online and distance education.

Alcorn State University is committed to providing students from diverse backgrounds high quality distance education opportunities that are consistent with its role and mission. These policies and procedures adhere to the best established practices in distance education, practices that have been proved through continuous evaluation at Alcorn and in the higher education community at large. Its values are quality, integrity and student-centeredness. Following these best practices, Alcorn will employ appropriate learning technologies and delivery formats to offer a variety of courses and programs to its students. The following elements of best practices inform student preparation and orientation, faculty orientation and development, deployment of the Alcorn curricula at a distance, and evaluation of both students and faculty in their respective review processes.

As the rapidly changing world of distance education evolves, so, too, will the Alcorn State University best practices. This set of guidelines is a living document, intended to be continuously reviewed, updated, and revised in order to maintain the highest standard of best practices in distance education.

University Mission Statement: Alcorn State University, a Historically Black College and University, is a comprehensive land-grant institution that celebrates a rich heritage with a diverse student and faculty population. The University emphasizes intellectual development and lifelong learning through the integration of diverse pedagogies, applied and basic research, cultural and professional programs, public service and outreach, while providing access to globally competitive academic and research programs. Alcorn strives to prepare graduates to be well-rounded future leaders of high character and to be successful in the global marketplace of the 21st century (Approved 2009).

University Vision Statement: Alcorn State University will become a premier comprehensive land-grant university. It will develop diverse students into globally competitive leaders and apply scientific research, through collaborative partnerships that benefit the surrounding communities, states, nation, and world (Approved 2009).

DEFINITIONS:

Distance Learning – a formal synchronous or asynchronous educational event in which the majority of the instruction (interaction between students and instructors and among students) in a course occurs when students and instructors are not in the same place.

Distance Learning Course – an individual course in which a proportion of instruction occurs when the student and the instructor are not in the same physical setting. The course is considered distance learning if the student receives a significant portion of their instruction at a distance.

Hybrid Course/Blended Instruction – an individual course which includes a combination of online and face-to-face meetings and instruction.

Online Course – an individual course in which the majority of instruction is delivered via distance learning. Some online courses may require proctored testing at approved testing sites and/or other course activities such as practicum experiences.

Traditional Course – a course is considered traditional when instruction is delivered on-site with face-to-face interaction between the instructor and the student. The traditional course may be web-enhanced.

Distance Learning Program – an approved collection of courses or course of study where a student can earn 50% or more credits necessary to qualify for a degree through distance learning.

Online Program – a fully online program is one where 100% of the courses are delivered online. For accreditation purposes, some programs may have attendance requirements for program completion such as proctored examinations or practicum experiences.

Synchronous Instruction – instructional activities that require instructors and students to be engaged at the same time.

Asynchronous Instruction – instructional activities that do not require instructors and students to be engaged at the same time.

Course Design Template – a university approved template with common components, criteria, and guidelines that faculty can adapt to their needs and requirements for all online courses.

Course Evaluation Rubric – a set of standards used to determine the quality of an online course.

Course Instructional Design – Instructional Design refers to the analysis of learning needs and the systematic approach to developing an online course in a manner that facilitates the transfer of knowledge and skills to the learner through the use of a variety of instructional methods, which cater to multiple learning styles, strategies, and preferences. The four basic steps in instructional design include analysis, definition of goals and learning objectives, design of learning activities, and evaluation of course and student performance.

PROCEDURES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Goals/Guiding Principles

1. All distance education courses are taught by faculty with the same standards, prerequisites, and requirements as on-campus sections of similar courses.

2. All Alcorn policies and procedures, standards, and guidelines for on-campus programs and instruction are applicable to distance education instruction, unless otherwise noted in the University policy manual or student handbook.
3. Distance education courses are comparable to on-campus courses in terms of course descriptions, academic expectations, and student learning outcomes.
4. Faculty members teaching online courses have the same teaching course load limitations and restrictions as faculty teaching face-to-face on-campus courses.
5. Faculty members teaching online courses have the same student enrollment course load limitations and restrictions as faculty teaching face-to-face on-campus courses.
6. In general, faculty teaching loads are fully face-to-face or a mixture of face-to-face and distance learning. On some occasions, faculty teaching loads may be fully comprised of distance learning courses; in all cases, however, faculty teaching distance education courses are not excused from keeping reasonable face-to-face office hours and participating in required campus-based events and service to the university.
7. Student enrollment for fully online courses are capped at 30 students per section.

Curriculum & Instruction

Provide access to high quality programs to meet the educational and training needs among a diverse populace within and beyond the typical geographic service region of Alcorn State University.

Evaluate student learning outcomes and conduct continuous evaluation of distance education programs and courses.

Distance education courses are designed to meet the same learning outcomes and level of rigor as traditional courses. All online courses are delivered through the university approved Center for Information Technology Services (CITS). Faculty utilize the university approved Online Education Course Development or Redevelopment Rubric (Exhibit A) to develop and teach online courses. The approved Online Education Course Development or Redevelopment Rubric consists of common components, criteria, and guidelines that faculty can adapt to the needs and requirements of each College or School department. In addition, the College or School department guidelines are followed to ensure course content is organized in a logical system that meets other required standards, such as accreditation, and to ensure course content is easily accessible to the student.

Students

Attract, retain, and graduate an engaged and success-oriented distance learner population.

Provide tools to assess student readiness for the distance education learning environment.

Provide appropriate library resources, reference services, and information literacy instruction to meet the needs of the distance learner.

Faculty

Recruit, support, and enable faculty members to effectively design, develop, and teach distance education courses.

Maintain the human and technical resources and network infrastructure necessary to reliably support and deliver distance education.

Assess emerging methods and new technological avenues for providing and delivering efficient and effective distance education.

Approval and Review Process for Online Courses

All online and hybrid courses must follow the same approval procedures as traditional face-to-face course including Program and University Curriculum Committee review and approval.

Department Chair Responsibilities to Faculty Teaching Online Courses

1. The Department Chair ensures departmental governance is adhered to for new and revised online courses.
2. The Department Chair ensures all faculty teaching online courses are aware of the Policies and Procedures for Planning and Conducting Distance Learning.
3. The Department Chair ensures that faculty teaching online courses receive appropriate training from the Office of Online Education.
4. Department Chairs are granted observational access to faculty teaching online within their departments. As with face-to-face classes, chairs and senior colleagues exercise respect for each faculty's online classroom. Department Chairs should not change, add to, or delete any content or setting within an online classroom under their observation. Instead, they will email, or consult with faculty outside the online classroom environment regarding any concerns.

Faculty Qualifications, Rights, and Evaluation

1. Faculty who teach in distance education programs and online courses must meet the same qualifications as faculty who teach in traditional courses at Alcorn State University.
2. Faculty who want to teach online courses are required to be certified by the Alcorn Office of Online Education and are required to take the online faculty certification course which was previously offered through Florida State College at Jacksonville, FL. This course is now provided through the Alcorn State University Office of Online Education. If the faculty was previously approved and has documentation where her/she passed the Florida State certification, then it is not necessary to take the ASU certification at this point although changes may occasionally arise and there may be a need to be updated on online programs.
3. Faculty who teach in distance education programs and online courses have the same Faculty Rights and Responsibilities as faculty who teach in traditional, on-campus courses, and have the same limitations and restrictions on teaching course loads and student enrollment in each course.
4. Faculty teaching in distance education programs and online courses are evaluated using the Alcorn State University Office of Online Education evaluation procedures and instruments.

Faculty Responsibilities

1. Faculty will follow university, college, and departmental guidelines for development, scheduling, and presentation of distance learning courses.
2. Faculty will ensure that the rigor of programs and quality of instruction are maintained within online courses (e.g., course design, course content, delivery of instruction, evaluating student

progress, assessing learning outcomes, and timely communication with students), and that they meet the same standards and criteria set for traditional campus-based courses.

3. Faculty will develop and maintain currency with the latest technologies and pedagogical techniques by participating in group professional development activities, in one-on-one support sessions, or through self-study.
4. Faculty will participate in curriculum development, coordinating of syllabi, and preparation of any comprehensive examinations, as required.
5. Faculty will assist in ordering any textbooks and/or supplementary materials necessary for the course (www.alcorn.edu/academics/library/).
6. Faculty will provide for and maintain regular, appropriate interaction with distance learning students.
7. Faculty will grade student assignments, projects, and tests in accordance with a schedule that has been communicated to students. Standards range from 5-7 days after a deadline for grading and returning student work with feedback.
8. Faculty will assist in developing processes to ensure the integrity of student work. that plagiarism checking software is included in the Alcorn Blackboard configuration. Faculty are responsible for learning how to interpret plagiarism software reports.
9. Faculty will review online courses every semester in which a particular course is taught to determine currency of materials and content.
10. Faculty will identify computer literacy prerequisites needed for students to participate successfully, so students may be properly advised about skill level that is required for the successful completion of the course.
11. Faculty will ensure that external links to third party materials, resources, and educational applications that are embedded in the online classroom can be used to enhance course instruction. External learning management systems that are used in place of the University approved Center for Information Technology Services (CITS) system are in violation of this policy.
12. Faculty will support and adhere to Alcorn State University Information Technologies Acceptable Use Statement and other related university policies.
13. Faculty will observe copyright laws and guidelines as they pertain to the Internet, the World Wide Web, software, and the use and reproduction of materials.
14. Faculty will secure copyright clearances on any copyright-protected materials used in online course development.

Office of Online Education Support

1. New (full-time, part-time, or adjunct) faculty members are required to attend the New Faculty Orientation training for the Center for Information Technology Services (CITS) and the orientation to Best Practices/Basic Template Elements for a Blackboard Online Classroom.
2. All first-time online instructors will be offered mentoring for the duration of their first distance learning course by the Office of Online Education.
3. Ongoing professional development opportunities in distance education strategies and technology tools are offered through the Office of Online Education (OOE) to ensure best practices are integrated in distance education courses.
4. Faculty are required to work with the Office of Online Education when developing new or revising distance education after the approval of the online courses.

Student Responsibilities

1. To ascertain possession of the appropriate skills, competency levels, course prerequisites, and equipment (including browser, operating system, and software) required for the distance learning course.
2. To determine that the course meets individual degree requirements.
3. To assume responsibility for contacting assigned advisor/instructor as needed.
4. To complete all assigned coursework by deadlines and before the end of the term.
5. To participate in the evaluation of the course content and presentation as well as the distance learning program as a whole.
6. To follow all relevant university guidelines, including the code of conduct and academic honesty policy.
7. To read and adhere to Alcorn State University's Information Technologies Acceptable Use Statement and other related university policies for all courses requiring computer usage.
8. To observe copyright laws and guidelines as they pertain to the Internet, the World Wide Web, software, and the use and reproduction of materials.
9. To observe mutual respect in all classroom interactions, recognizing that opinions and positions don't always have to agree, but respect should be shown at all times.
10. Department Chairs, Deans and instructors will be responsible for ensuring that all distance learning program materials clearly and accurately represent the program, including detailed program completion requirements, the nature of the learning experience, programs, faculty responsibilities, and the nature of faculty-student, student-faculty, and student-student interaction opportunities, techniques, and requirements. In the case of hybrid courses, information regarding the percentage of the course to be done at a distance and the nature of that experience will be provided to students during course registration and will accurately represent the expectations.
11. Instructors and Department Chairs will be responsible for ensuring that all distance learning course materials clearly and accurately represent the course, including the nature of the learning experience, faculty responsibilities, and the nature of faculty-student, student-faculty, and student-student interaction opportunities, techniques, and requirements. Alcorn State University students enrolled in distance learning will have access to academic support, advising, course registration, and financial aid assistance, appropriate for distance learning students (i.e., distance learning students will not be required to come to campus in order to obtain these services). Technology assistance is available through the University's 24-hour helpdesk.
12. Students may obtain academic advising and other support services by phone, e-mail, or in-person. Program materials clearly describe how students obtain these support services.
13. Alcorn provides library and information resources, services, and support for academic programs, including training in information literacy. These resources and services are accessible at a distance on a timely basis. Through Alcorn State University's library web pages, access is maintained to scholarly databases and to the online catalog of materials owned by the libraries. Interlibrary loan service is accessible to distance learning students via the web page to borrow materials from our libraries. Resource material is available electronically through this system and also via postal delivery for items that cannot be transmitted electronically. Personal assistance is available from the librarians and staff via email and telephone.
14. Administrative processes such as admissions and registration are readily accessible to distance students via the alcorn.edu web site. Students will be provided with e-mail accounts and access to the university's portal. Students can register online and access course schedules, grades, degree audits, financial aid and billing information. Tuition payments can be made online. Additionally, the book store is available via the web, and all books and course materials can be purchased online. Program materials clearly describe how access is obtained.

Student Support

Students enrolled in distance education programs and courses shall have access to the range of student services to support their learning comparable to that of the student enrolled in a traditional course. Students taking distance education courses will be held to the same requirements of academic integrity as students enrolled in traditional courses. The Center for Information Technology Services (CITS) provides orientation opportunities and resources for students enrolled in online courses that are appropriate to the technologies used, the content, and the learner.

Outcomes Assessment

1. Distance learning programs are expected to produce the same learning outcomes as comparable classroom-based programs. The procedure for assessing and evaluating these outcomes will be similar to the procedures used for other programs at Alcorn State University.
2. All programs at Alcorn State University are designed to be coherent; the components each serve a purpose and build on one another (whether sequentially or in parallel) to achieve predetermined, measurable learning outcomes. Sometimes specific courses are identified as the means of achieving specific program goals and objectives (such as writing in the discipline). It is up to each department to establish a plan for how each course fits into programs, how courses build on one another, and in which courses each program goal is addressed.
3. The means chosen for assessing student learning are appropriate to the program content, course learning design, available technologies, and characteristics of the learners. The instruments used for assessing student learning online may be different from those used for assessing learning in the traditional classroom.

Online course activities generate more written records of student thinking (in discussion boards, for example), which distance learning instructors may archive and analyze later in detail (looking for timely appearance in discussions of key words and phrases, for example). In keeping this extensive course “paper trail,” security is paramount and student privacy is always protected. To further ensure academic integrity, the Office of Online Education has put in place BioSig in each Blackboard which is a program designed to provide authentication for students at Alcorn State University.

Program Evaluation

1. The institution has processes in place to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of all aspects of its programs, including distance learning programs on a regular basis, both at the course and program level. An example would be the Student Course Evaluation.
2. Every online and hybrid course will make the Alcorn State University Student Course Evaluation available through the Center for Information Technology Services (CITS) two weeks prior to the conclusion of full-semester courses and one week prior to intensive courses. Students and faculty will be notified via email when the surveys have been deployed. Survey results will be anonymous.
3. Student Course Evaluations will be reviewed in a timely manner by the Chairs and will be shared with the Department Deans and Provost.
4. The evaluation results are used for continuous program improvement. Chairs and instructors monitor student progress and student complaints and develop intervention strategies utilizing academic support staff (e.g., Academic Advising, tutors, the Writing Center) where needed.
5. Program evaluation procedures include a determination that distance learning programs result in learning outcomes appropriate to the rigor and breadth of the college degree or certificate awarded. All graduate and undergraduate programs (traditional and online) demonstrate that students achieve deep learning. Program Evaluation Surveys will be administered apart from Student Course Evaluations.

Essential Elements for a Blackboard Online Classroom (Many or most of these elements should be separate tabs within the Blackboard platform.)

1. Syllabus – The same information conveyed in your syllabus for a face-to-face class should be conveyed here. It is best to keep the syllabus concise and to provide supplemental information elsewhere.
2. Course Introduction—This tab provides a short, engaging description of the course and its major objectives. Often, it can be drawn from the syllabus.
3. Course Information—This tab provides such information as grading rubric(s), links to eBooks for the course if available, and supplemental resources such as information about and links to the library, writing center, or similar information.
4. Doc Sharing—This tab serves two functions, first as a place where the faculty member can post written lectures or notes, if desired, and any specific guidance documents for the course, and second as a place where students can post drafts for instructor feedback or peer editing.
5. Submission Links—These links provide the location for students to submit all graded assignments and are generally directly linked to the online gradebook for ease in grading and record keeping.
6. Class Café—This forum provides a “safe place” for students to interact with the faculty member and each other in a non-graded, non-judgmental manner. For instance, the faculty member might provide a warm, non-academic greeting before the course begins and invite students to do the same during Week One. The faculty member should respond to all student introductions during the first week and then, generally, leave the Class Café as a student-to-student forum for the rest of the term.
7. Contact the Instructor—While each instructor will determine how he or she prefers to be contacted by students and conform to the university’s policy (telephone, email, etc.), this forum is embedded within the classroom shell. It contains a short academic biography of the instructor. Students should be strongly encouraged to ask all non-personal questions about the course within this forum, and the faculty member should answer questions here so that all students can benefit from the answers. Personal student concerns such as issues regarding grades should not be discussed in the public Contact the Instructor area to comply with FERPA policies.
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1mEP_mcgwnQcYsL0yQoOzwxKY_irFtuUskc9_HOEKMIQ/edit. Instructor posts should be responded to within 24 hours when possible.
8. Announcements—This tab provides the instructor with space before and during the course to post important information specific to this course (specific grading expectations, expectations regarding class participation, general feedback on assignments appropriate for the entire class, etc.). It is important to communicate the same information to students in multiple ways, so it does not matter if announcements include repeated information from the syllabus.
9. Weekly Assignments Section—A separate tab for each week of the course should highlight assignments due each week and provide instructions for those assignments. Additionally, each weekly tab should include a link to the Discussion area for that week.

Optional Elements for a Blackboard Online Classroom

1. Calendar – This tab may repeat information from the syllabus, but is usually presented in a graphical format highlighting the dates when each assignment will be due.
2. Webliography—This tab provides a space for the instructor to provide links to supplemental reading materials.
3. Academic Integrity—This tab should be developed in keeping with Alcorn’s specific policies regarding academic integrity. It is best for students to know these policies in advance, so posting an announcement leading students to this link during Week One is a good practice.
4. Blogs—Blackboard provides the option for faculty members or students to write a blog during the course. Unless there is a specific pedagogical reason to implement this technology, it is generally unnecessary.
5. Live Chat—The main purpose of asynchronous online learning is to provide students with other commitments a chance to learn at their own pace and in their own time without requiring them to be present at specific time intervals; however, optional live chat sessions with the faculty member (usually no more than once per week) can take the place of keeping “office hours” and can enrich the discussion experience for students. It is generally best to vary the times for the chats or to hold all of them in the evening hours. Better still, consider polling your students about the times most convenient for them.
6. Groups—Blackboard gives you the option to keep all students enrolled in the course in one group or to divide students into smaller groups. For courses with enrollment of 10 or fewer students, unless students are doing group projects, it is generally best not to break students into groups. For large enrollment courses (20 plus), it is often best to divide students into smaller groups, especially for discussion purposes, so that the number of posts each student has to review does not become overwhelming. The instructor does more or less the same amount of work either way, and this is a personal choice of the instructor based on the course being taught.
7. Video and Audio—Blackboard supports including audio and video technology such as Jing, YouTube, or SoftChalk. As long as audio and video are enhancements to the course rather than an unnecessary level of complexity, then they can be effective instructional tools. For instance, a nursing student needs to hear a heart murmur to understand what it sounds like rather than simply reading about it in a book.

General Guidelines for Assignments

The basic rule is that an online course should include the same amount of academic rigor and the same essential activities as a face-to-face course of the same duration. Having said that, it is generally best to keep the reading and writing expectations to the maximum they must be, but the minimum they can be, to sufficiently cover the learning objectives. It is also important as when designing any course to consider the level of the course—beginning undergraduate, advanced undergraduate, or graduate. The number and type of assignments vary considerably based on the content being taught, so these are general guidelines that should be broadly considered and sometimes even overruled by content-based considerations of each

discipline. Having said that, it is a best practice in online education to keep course shells as similar as possible throughout the learning experience of the students, and it is also a best practice for multiple sections of the same course to be built with exactly the same course shells, including assignments. Regarding the determination of point values for each assignment, this is best done through individual consultation with each department or faculty member and should be specific to each course.

1. Discussion - Students should be required to participate each week, early and often, in discussion with the instructor and with classmates. Consider starting each week with a “discussion spark” which is an open-ended question relating the major learning outcomes of the week to some aspect of the professional lives of the students. Students should be able to respond to the spark from their own experience without doing any reading or research. In some undergraduate courses in which most students are not working adults, the spark should relate to their personal lives or current events. The purpose is to engage students from day one each week. Additionally, students should be required to post one more detailed “main” post by mid-week each week (based on reading and/or research) and to respond to the main post of at least one classmate by the end of each week (total of three weekly posts minimum with more posts expected). For the most part, discussions should not be accepted as late work, because when each week is over, there is really no way to engage with classmates in discussion. When facilitated diligently and creatively by the faculty member, online discussion threads can be just as engaging and useful to students as face-to-face learning and are often where the best learning takes place online.
2. Group Projects—The same pros and cons surrounding group projects exist online as in face-to-face classrooms—imbalance of participation among students, difficulty scheduling group work time (cons), and simulation of real workplace teams (pro). Generally, group projects should be considered when they serve the content being taught. One way to effectively include group work, but to keep it manageable for students, is to engage them in peer editing of each other’s assignments. For example, require each student to post a draft in Doc Sharing, and require each student to peer edit the draft of one classmate.
3. Final Projects and Weekly Milestones—Final or capstone projects are often the largest and most time- consuming elements of many courses. Help students to overcome the tendency to procrastinate, and help them begin to see learning as a process rather than a destination, by dividing the final projects into weekly milestones. Require one small element of the final project to be due each week, and tie a small number of points to each milestone assignment. Each week’s milestone builds on the ones already completed, and by the time the final project is due, students have a big head start on it. It is also generally best to require final projects due in the next- to-last rather than last week of the course in case students are late getting them done and to allow more time for grading.
4. Quizzes and Exams—Like group work, there are many schools of thought about the validity and necessity of quizzes and exams. Generally, if you are a faculty member who relies heavily on these tools in other classroom settings, you will probably rely on them in online settings. If you believe that student learning is best measured in other ways,

such as the evaluation of student writing, then you will probably rely on quizzes and exams less. They can be embedded directly into the classroom shells, and like other elements, they can be “hidden” from student view until their time in the course arrives. Keep in mind, regardless of honor code or other safeguards, it is difficult if not impossible to monitor academic integrity in online courses when it comes to quizzes and objective exams. It is easier to monitor academic integrity of written assignments through programs such as Turnitin or SafeAssign.

5. Research Papers, Weekly Writing Assignments, or Practice Assignments—Research papers, journals, weekly short essays, book reviews, literature reviews, mathematical problems, etc., can all be incorporated into your asynchronous online courses just as they can be incorporated into your face-to-face and synchronous online courses. The content being taught, as well as the level of the course, should largely dictate the number, length, and type of written assignments. Refrain, however, from the assumption that significantly more or less work should be assigned in online courses.

Policy detail and Checklist are found at

http://www.alcorn.edu/data/files/gallery/ContentGallery/Online_Learning_Programs_Policy.pdf.