Policies on Distance Education and Off-Campus Programs

Preface

This is a set of policies and procedures for distance education and off-campus courses and programs offered by the University of Mississippi (the University). Distance education offerings are administered by the Division of Outreach and Continuing Education. Additionally, this policy addresses the relationship between distance education activities offered by this university and those programs involving other institutions.

Important issues covered in this policy include the role of faculty in the approval of distance education courses and programs, the integration of such programs with our traditional offerings, the student learning outcomes of distance education programs, faculty involvement with distance education, and learning support services.

The following are guiding principles upon which the policies are based:

- The faculty has a collective responsibility to ensure the academic quality and integrity of courses and degree programs.
- Distance education (DE) and off-campus (OC) courses and programs should be consistent with the academic mission of the University.
- All courses shall include the opportunity for adequate interactions between faculty and students, as well as communication among students when possible.
- Admissions criteria for degree programs should be equivalent for on- and off-campus sites.
- Student learning outcomes should be comparable for programs offered via various modes.
- Students should have adequate access to learning resources and student support services.
- The University should provide appropriate training and support services for faculty who teach distance education and off-campus courses.
- All distance education and off-campus offerings must adhere to the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) distance learning criteria, and, where applicable, to the appropriate accreditation association guidelines for the individual disciplines.

I.   Definition of Terms

Distance Education (DE) consists of all arrangements for providing instruction through technology-based delivery modes to persons engaged in planned learning in a place or at a time different from that of the instructor or instructors. Instruction may be synchronous or asynchronous. Synchronous indicates the instructors and students communicate in real time, while asynchronous indicates the instructors and students participate and communicate at different times.

A **regional campus** or **delivery site** is a location (collectively referred to as an off-campus (OC) location) that is physically at a distance from the main campus. Instruction at off-campus locations may use the traditional instructor-class format or a DE technology, such as a class taught at the main campus that is transmitted to an off-campus location using technology-based instruction. A course delivered off campus in a traditional instructor-class format is considered a DE course only if the course also involves a significant degree of technology-based instruction. A "significant degree" is defined by the criterion that a student's success in the class requires him or her to have access to the DE technology (i.e., the student cannot have a reasonable chance to achieve comparable learning and class success by employing non-technology based methods). By this definition, an off-campus course, in which an instructor supplements a traditional in-person delivery with on-line delivery or materials, may or may not be considered a DE course, depending on how significant the on-line component is to successfully learning the subject matter.

Instruction refers to any course that results in academic credit. Non-credit-based courses are not required to be governed by this policy statement.

Technology-based instruction includes, but is not limited to, instruction that uses the internet; one-way and two-way transmissions through open broadcast, closed circuit, cable, microwave, broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite, or wireless communications devices; audio conferencing; or video cassettes, DVD's, and CD-ROMs, television, other electronic media, and a combination of telephone with any of the above video modes.

Learning management systems refer to such programs as Blackboard, which can provide an internet-based interface for online communication between instructors and students. This type of system enables posting of course content, assignments, announcements, e-mail contact, and chat room.

A **hybrid course** describes a course in which some traditional face-to-face instruction has been replaced with online learning activities or other technology-based instruction. A hybrid course is designed to integrate face-to-face and online activities to reinforce or complement one another. The online component may be anywhere from 20-50% of the course.

An **online course** is one in which 51% or more of the instruction and learning activities occur via the internet (online), either synchronous or asynchronous, and is often a combination of the two.

An **iStudy course** is an independent study course for college credit. iStudy courses are flexible and self-paced. They may be online and/or paper-based. For degree-seeking students, the Dean's approval is needed to apply iStudy course credit to the degree.

An **online educational program** is any program where 51% or more of the program content is delivered through online courses or other electronic means.

A **hybrid educational program** is an educational program where 25-50% of the program content is delivered through online courses or other electronic means.

Note: Study Abroad is not considered a DE/OC course.

II.   Goals of Distance Education and Off-Campus Programs Offered at the University of Mississippi

Distance education (DE) and off-campus (OC) programs are intended to provide increased access to higher education for individuals who are not able to access traditional campus-based study. DE/OC programs minimize or alter the barriers of time, distance, physical disability, and personal and professional responsibilities that may otherwise hinder students' access to traditional study.

It is the goal of the University that there be no difference in the academic quality and student learning standards between courses and programs delivered through DE technologies and those taught in a traditional manner. To this end, academic standards for DE/OC courses and programs shall be comparable to those in the same course delivered on campus. The academic department of origin shall be responsible for all accreditation and faculty standards.

III.   Curriculum and Instruction

A variety of academic issues are raised by DE/OC courses and programs. DE/OC programs and courses adhere to the same academic standards, policies, and rigor as those offered on campus. The courses and programs are approved through the usual university curriculum approval process. Selection of courses/programs to be offered is the purview of the appropriate academic unit, which provides faculty oversight of the program/course. For all degree programs offered through DE and/or at OC locations, the programs should embody a coherent course of study that is compatible with the University's mission and is based upon a field of study appropriate to higher education.

Before any newly created course or program that involves DE delivery or delivery to an OC location is offered by the University, a request for such a new DE/OC course or program must originate in and be approved by an academic department and dean (and the Curriculum and Policy Committee in certain schools or the College). The approval process

then follows the typical academic workflow process. The Graduate and/or Undergraduate Council reviews the academic content and faculty qualifications for the new DE/OC courses or programs. The Council or Councils will exercise their authority to approve or disapprove the requests. The Council of Academic Administrators reviews and approves/disapproves the proposed new course or program. If a proposed course or program is approved through these channels, the Office of the Provost is responsible for seeking further approval from the IHL Board and/or informing SACSCOC when appropriate.

When courses are scheduled to be offered through DE or at OC locations, the delivery method and/or location is indicated during the event planning (i.e., course scheduling) process. The location and/or mode must be approved by the academic department chair and respective dean. If a department chair and dean are changing (adding or deleting) DE/OC course offerings or programs, they should consult with the relevant OC locations and the Division of Outreach and Continuing Education.

IIIa. Calendar issues: As a general rule, courses taught at OC locations, online, or as hybrid courses, follow the common academic calendars. University of Mississippi (UM) students also may complete online or term-based iStudy courses. All term dates associated with University policies, the academic calendar, and catalog are applied.

Full-year iStudy courses are available to both UM students and non-UM students. These are full-year courses and are not tied to the term academic calendar. A student has one year from enrollment to complete a full-year iStudy course. The minimum time for completion of an asynchronous course is two months.

IIIb. Academic integrity of DE/OC courses: Maintaining the academic integrity of DE/OC courses is a major concern. The University's policies regarding academic integrity apply fully to DE/OC courses and programs.

For courses that involve graded tests as a major component in determining a student's grade, the Division of Outreach and Continuing Education will assist in the identification of test-taking locations and exam proctors (e.g., testing center, regional campus sites, ProctorU). The University Proctored Assessment Policy and the Independent-Study Proctored Testing Policy outline student responsibilities for taking proctored exams.

The University operates in compliance with the US Federal Higher Education Opportunity Act concerning the verification of student identity and the student's right to privacy in DE. Additional details of our policy can be found in the University's Policy for Student Information and Privacy in Online Education. The University will verify student identity using at least one of these methods: individual secure login and password provided by the University of Mississippi, proctored assessments, other emerging technologies and practices shown to be effective in verifying student identification, and pedagogical and related practices that are effective in verifying student identity. Faculty are taught best practices for student authentication and must implement at least one student identification technique. Faculty are encouraged to use Blackboard, which requires a secure login and password for each student to access course

materials and submit assignments. Students will be notified at the time of registration/enrollment of any fees associated with verification of student identity. Students are responsible for paying proctor fees required by some testing services.

Online students are subject to the same attendance policies and procedures as traditional students. Student attendance in online courses is further defined and outlined in the University's Attendance Policy for Online Education. Attendance is defined as active participation in the course as described in the individual course syllabus.

Accurate headcount enrollment reports for courses at OC locations, for online courses, and for iStudy courses are maintained by the Office of Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Planning.

IIIc. Amount and level of credit: The University of Mississippi employs sound and acceptable practices for determining the amount and level of credit awarded and justifies the use of a unit other than a semester credit hour by explaining its equivalency.

IIId. Residence credit versus transfer credit: DE/OC courses offered by the University and taken by students at OC locations are considered to be resident credit. Online and iStudy courses are also considered to be resident credit.

Courses taken by DE and offered by another regionally accredited institution (e.g., correspondence or internet-based courses offered by another accredited institution) are considered to be transfer credit, and the pertinent rules apply. An exception to this is the case in which a DE course has been approved to be offered by the Mississippi IHL in a collaborative, cooperative, or dual manner by more than one state institution.

IIIe. Transcripts and notation for DE/OC courses: Transcripts for University students indicate year-long iStudy courses. Online courses, term-based iStudy courses, and courses taken at OC locations have no special notation on transcripts.

IIIf. It is the policy of the University that academic support and learning support services must be appropriate and specifically related to the DE/OC courses and programs offered. These services are coordinated through the Division of Outreach and Continuing Education.

IV.   Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment

Academic programs that are delivered through DE/OC are subject to the same type of assessment procedures as other programs, including the assessment of student learning outcomes, student retention, and student evaluation. The Division of Outreach and Continuing Education manages a process for online course and program review. Students enrolled in DE/OC courses are provided the opportunity to participate in the course and instructor evaluation process, similar to the main campus process. The OC locations also assess the effectiveness and efficiency of delivery, the availability of academic and student support services, and student access to faculty.

V.   Fiscal Issues

Va. Tuition and fees: The Division of Outreach and Continuing Education, in collaboration with the Office of the Provost and the Vice Chancellor for Administration and Finance, recommends tuition rates, which must be approved by the IHL Board. Tuition rates may vary based on the method of delivery and the program of study. There are online course fees associated with online courses. Non-residents are charged a non-resident fee when taking online courses and term-based iStudy courses. Non-residents are not charged non-resident fees when taking year-long iStudy courses. Non-residents are not charged non-resident fees when participating in particular on-line academic programs. It is also important to note that financial aid policies regarding Cost of Attendance estimates, awarding, and disbursement of aid can be impacted by the type of course. Term-based online courses are typically treated like traditional courses for purposes of financial aid, but special rules apply for iStudy and online degree programs. Scholarships may or may not cover all of the fees.

Vb. FTE credits: According to IHL Policy, all FTE credits for DE/OC courses shall reside with the institution where students are enrolled, and credit hours generated in DE/OC courses/programs may be included in the institution's instruction budget base. Off-campus locations may have a separate budget and allocation from the state.

VI.   External Factors

VIa. Marketing and assessing course/program demand: Determining the demand for courses and programs is a duty of academic departments, schools, and the Division of Outreach and Continuing Education. Appropriately advertising courses and programs is the duty of the Division of Outreach and Continuing Education in conjunction with departments. Advertising, recruiting, and admissions information must adequately and accurately represent the DE/OC programs, requirements, and services available.

VIb. Accreditation: Reporting changes in DE/OC course/program offerings to SACSCOC and the IHL Board is the duty of the Office of the Provost. The academic department, dean of the school, director of the Division of Outreach and Continuing Education, and the Provost are jointly responsible for assuring that accreditation criteria for both regional and disciplinary agencies are met. The *Guidelines for Identifying Substantive Changes* explain the steps and responsibilities for reporting changes to SACSCOC.

VIc. State-wide DE activities: The University's DE activities must adhere to the IHL Board's Distance Learning Policy.

VId. Courses developed by faculty for electronic offering, through oversight by the Office of

Online Design and eLearning within the Division of Outreach and Continuing Education, are considered to be the intellectual property of the creator. The University retains the right to the Fair Use of the materials (see below).

VII.   Faculty Issues

VIIa. Faculty qualifications and training: A faculty member offering a DE/OC course must be qualified to do so. Assigned faculty for DE/OC courses will have comparable expertise, experience, and rank as faculty assigned to face-to-face courses. To offer an undergraduate course, the faculty instructor must have a masters degree in the teaching discipline. To offer a graduate course, the faculty instructor must have a terminal degree in the teaching discipline. In exceptional cases, other relevant experiences may be substituted for the advanced degree.

Before being compensated for teaching a DE/OC course, the instructor must submit an official transcript of his or her terminal degree to the Department of Human Resources. For faculty teaching graduate courses via DE/OC, a resume demonstrating expertise in the subject matter must be submitted to and evaluated by the chair of the department in which the course is taught. The Dean of the Graduate School must approve membership in the Graduate Faculty. The department chair is responsible for ensuring that the instructor has submitted his or her transcript and resume.

Before an instructor can be added as the instructor of record for a web-based DE course, she/he must be endorsed by the Office of Online Design and eLearning within the Division of Outreach and Continuing Education. To be endorsed, instructors must obtain approval to teach online from their department chair and complete the eLearning Teaching Course. Additional information about instructor training for online courses can be found in the Division of Outreach and Continuing Education's Online Policy and Procedure Manual.

The Division of Outreach and Continuing Education provides development opportunities for faculty to increase their awareness of DE methodologies and improve their instructional skills. The University provides adequate equipment, software, and communications access to support faculty-student interactions. Faculty are responsible for informing students about technical skill prerequisites and required hardware, software, and supplemental materials necessary for course participation in each syllabus.

VIIb. Teaching assignments; "in-load" versus "off-load": Whether a course to be taught by a faculty instructor is "in-load" or "off-load" determines whether extra compensation can be earned. This determination is made by the department chair, academic dean, and Division of Outreach and Continuing Education. Ordinarily, DE/OC courses offered through the Division of Outreach and Continuing Education are considered to be "off-load" assignments for Oxford-based faculty. However, if a faculty member is hired with the understanding that he or she will teach courses, whether by DE or traditional mode to students at off-campus sites or online, teaching assignments will ordinarily be considered "in-load," even if the courses are administered by the Division of Outreach and Continuing Education. Online courses offered by a faculty member as an alternate way to deliver a course to students on campus would most likely be considered in-load.

VIIc. Faculty compensation for teaching a DE course: The Division of Outreach and Continuing Education, with approval by the Provost, will establish compensation levels for faculty, temporary faculty, and graduate instructors involved in the delivery of DE/OC courses. This is outlined in the Division of Outreach and Continuing Education Online Policy and Procedure Manual.

VIId. Faculty participating in DE courses offered by other institutions: If a faculty member offers a DE course in collaboration with another Mississippi institution, with the Division of Outreach and Continuing Education being the facilitator, the faculty member will be eligible for additional compensation according to standard policies of the Division of Outreach and Continuing Education. A full-time faculty member may not be employed by another educational institution or agency for the purpose of offering a credit-bearing course during the time when the faculty member is employed by the University, unless approved by the Provost.

VIIe. Faculty training in the development of DE delivery technologies: When DE is used, staff in the Division of Outreach and Continuing Education are responsible for providing technical assistance and any training in the use of the equipment. For internet-based DE courses, resources of Academic Computing, including the equipment in the Faculty Technology Development Center, are available to faculty to enable them to develop the educational materials.

VIII. Ownership of Educational Materials

When faculty create technology-based instructional materials, the University's Copyright Policy applies. Except in cases of specific assignments to create electronic instructional materials and cases of substantial use of University resources in the creation of such materials, a faculty instructor will own the copyright to the intellectual property. The University, however, reserves the right to claim Fair Use of such electronic instructional materials for its intended instructional purpose. If funds or release time is provided to a faculty member to develop technology-based course materials, it is important to prepare a written memorandum, signed by both the faculty member and the appropriate administrative unit, to clearly explain issues related to ownership and intended use of the course materials.

IX. Learning and Library Resources

The Division of Outreach and Continuing Education is primarily responsible for maintaining and operating DE rooms on the Oxford campus and at the Booneville, DeSoto, Grenada, and Tupelo locations. The Division of Outreach and Continuing Education will be responsible for providing adequate, accessible, internet-connected computer labs and facilities at the OC sites for students enrolled in OC courses through the Division of Outreach and Continuing Education. The Office of Information Technology will assist in providing adequate internet access support at these sites. Academic Computing will support Blackboard or other course management programs and will provide assistance to students in using these technologies.

On-line library services are available to OC students. The Division of Outreach and Continuing Education and the J. D. Williams Library will work together to provide delivery of library materials to OC students. Working within its fiscal restraints, the J. D. Williams Library is responsible for maintaining an adequate set of on-line reference materials for the classes delivered off campus.

X.   Student Services and Policies

Appropriate student services, including academic advising, financial aid services, registration assistance, and proctoring of exams, will be coordinated by the Division of Outreach and Continuing Education for students at OC locations or engaged in DE courses or programs offered through the University. Students have access to a range of student services, including procedures to resolve complaints, disability services, and career services.

All University academic, privacy, and conduct policies apply to students enrolled in DE/OC courses and programs. The Policy for Student Information and Privacy in Online Education ensures that the University operates in compliance with federal and state laws, including FERPA. Information about Student Privacy Rights, FERPA, and the University's processes for complying with its provisions are published in the student handbook.