Interaction in courses delivered via distance education.

U.S. Department of Education regulations make clear distinctions between “distance education” and a “correspondence course.” The key factor is the type and frequency of interaction between faculty members and student. The federal definitions are:

*Correspondence course:*

(1) 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. 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.

(2) If a course is part correspondence and part residential training, the Secretary considers the course to be a correspondence course.

(3) A correspondence course is not distance education.

*Distance education* means education that uses one or more of the technologies listed in paragraphs (1) through (4) of this definition 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. The technologies may include—

(1) The internet;

(2) One-way and two-way transmissions through open broadcast, closed circuit, cable, microwave, broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite, or wireless communications devices;

(3) Audio conferencing; or

(4) Video cassettes, DVDs, and CD-ROMs, if the cassettes, DVDs, or CD-ROMs are used in a course in conjunction with any of the technologies listed in paragraphs (1) through (3) of this definition.

The key factor distinguishing correspondence courses from distance education is “regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor” with much of that interaction being initiated by the instructor. The form of the interaction may be email exchanges, feedback on assignments, postings on discussion boards, Q&A sessions, blogs, synchronous teleconference exchange, etc. Reading and viewing assignments and taking a midterm and final exam would not be qualifying interaction. We know that good pedagogy requires feedback to the student and the Department of Education is looking for the feedback loop in the distance education experience.

Courses that are determined to be “correspondence courses” based on the pedagogies employed are not eligible for federal financial aid regardless of how the institution categorizes those courses. Therefore, it is imperative that distance education courses be designed to ensure regular and substantive interaction between faculty and students, just as in the classroom. Is the faculty member responding to something the students said or wrote? Does the faculty member provide useful feedback on assignments, discussion board posts, student questions, etc.? These are questions that should be answered as you design and deliver your distance course. Indiana State University has instructional designers available to assist you in designing class activities that will provide this type of interaction. Also take note of the “frequent” requirement. While it is not defined in the regulations, certainly faculty should be in contact with their students a minimum of once per week in regular length semesters and more frequently during accelerated terms.

A closely related issue is determining attendance in a distance course. To comply with financial aid regulations we must document that students are attending class. Indiana State University asks faculty to provide two data points on attendance, three week attendance and last day of attendance. To be attending a student must engage in an “academically related activity.”

The act of the students merely logging into Blackboard does not meet the Department of Education’s test of an “academically related activity.” Activities that probably do meet that test are posting to an online discussion board, taking a test or quiz, submitting an assignment participating in a synchronous teleconference (Collaborate), etc. Instructors should structure their courses to ensure that such activities are documented at least weekly.