ONLINE at SOUTHERN MISS

Policy Statement

The University of Southern Mississippi began the eLearning Initiative in the spring of 2009. This initiative is focused on developing additional fully online degree programs to increase enrollment, improve student satisfaction, and raise retention and graduation rates at Southern Miss. The project encompasses many aspects of launching a successful online program including marketing and outreach efforts, faculty training and support, course scheduling and development, upgrading program and business processes, and sustaining growth.

We currently have undergraduate programs, graduate programs, hybrid/executive format programs, certificate programs, and a supplemental endorsement. In addition to our online degree programs, we offer a wide variety of fully online classes.

Reason for Policy/Purpose

This policy is required for the effective communication of university policies regarding Online Learning at Southern Miss.

Who Needs to Know This Policy

All members of The University of Southern Mississippi community.

Website Address for this Policy

www.usm.edu/institutional-policies/policy-acaf-lec-001
1.0 Definitions

SACS-COC Definition of Distance Education

For the purposes of the Commission on College’s accreditation review, distance education is a formal education process 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.

IHL Definition of Distance Learning

Distance learning may be defined as “institutionally based formal education where the learning group is separated and where interactive communication systems are used to connect instructors, learners, and resources” (The Quarterly Reviews of Distance Education) or “the acquisition of knowledge and skills through mediated information and instruction, encompassing all technologies and other forms of learning at a distance” (United States Distance Learning Association).

Presently, a course is considered to be a distance learning course when at least fifty (50) percent of the course is available via technology-based instruction while a program is considered to be a distance learning program when at least fifty (50) percent of the program is available via technology based instruction.

Undergraduate Fully Online Program

All courses listed in the degree plan are available online, either through USM or MSVCC. This includes all GEC categories, major area of study requirements, and any additional requirements. A student would not have to take a face-to-face course to complete this degree. Admission to an undergraduate fully online program may be restricted to a certain cohort. A student who is admitted to a fully online program is given an online campus code in the student program panel in SOAR.

Undergraduate Hybrid Online Major Area of Study

Fifty (50) percent or more of courses listed under Major Area of Study Requirements in the degree plan are available online. Only courses offered by the program’s department/school should be listed under major Area of Study Requirements.
Undergraduate Hybrid Online General or College Curriculum

Fifty (50) percent or more of courses listed under a Curriculum Requirement in the degree plan are available online. This includes, but is not limited to, General Education Curriculum, BBSA Requirements, BA Requirements, and Teacher Licensure Requirements.

Graduate Fully Online Program

All courses listed in the program’s Plan of Study are available online through USM. A student would not have to take a face-to-face course to complete this degree. A student who is admitted to a fully online program is given an online campus code in the student program panel in SOAR.

Graduate Hybrid Online Plan of Study

Fifty (50) percent or more of courses offered by the program’s department/school and listed in the program’s Plan of Study are available online.

Graduate Hybrid Online General Curriculum

Fifty (50) percent or more of courses listed under a Curriculum Requirement in the Plan of Study are available online. This includes, but is not limited to, Research Tools and Dissertation Support.

Graduate Executive Format Program

A graduate program developed especially for working executives, managers, and professionals. Executive programs generally require professional work experience for entrance and students may be admitted as a cohort. Courses are delivered through intensive campus meetings (weekends or several full days once a month, for example) and online communications. An Executive Format Program can have fifty (50) percent or more of courses offered online or less than fifty (50) percent of courses offered online.

Graduate Executive Format Program (Online classification)

Fifty (50) percent or more of courses offered by the program’s department/school and listed in the program’s Plan of Study are available online.

Graduate Executive Format Program (Alternative Delivery classification)

Less than fifty (50) percent of courses offered online.

Undergraduate and Graduate Fully Online Certificate

All courses listed in the certificate’s curriculum are available online through Southern Miss. A student would not be required to take a face-to-face course to complete this certificate.
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<td>Fifty (50) percent or more of the courses listed in the certificate curriculum is available online.</td>
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<td>A student enrolled in an Executive Format Program.</td>
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| Web Supplement Course                         | A course with less than fifty (50) percent online component. In SOAR, web supplement courses are coded as follows:  
  a) Campus-Hattiesburg or Gulf Coast  
  b) Location-Hattiesburg, Gulf Park, Keesler, Gulf Coast Research Center, Stennis, etc.  
  c) Instruction Mode-C-5 Web Supplement (Departments do NOT enter the instruction mode for these classes. Instructors complete and submit the Course Supplement Request Form found at: http://www.usm.edu/elo/csrf/. Once the request is received in LEC, a course shell is created and the instruction mode is changed and a course attribute of web supplement is added.) |
| Hybrid Online Course                          | A course with fifty (50) to ninety-nine (99) percent online component. Student must either meet on campus or visit the campus at some point during the semester. In SOAR, hybrid courses are coded as follows:  
  a) Campus-Hattiesburg or Gulf Coast  
  b) Location-Online  
  c) Instruction Mode-C-9  
  d) Class Note-Online Hybrid |
| Fully Online Course                           | A course delivered on-hundred (100) percent online. Students are not required to meet on campus or visit the campus at any point during the semester. In SOAR, hybrid online courses are coded as follows:  
  a) Campus-Online  
  b) Location-Online  
  c) Instructional Mode- CO Fully Online  
  d) Class Note-Online web referral |
| Fully Online Student                          | A student enrolled in a fully online program.                                                                                                                                                              |
| Hybrid Online Student                         | A student enrolled in a fully online course or a hybrid online course, but is not enrolled in a Fully Online program. A Hybrid Online Student may, in a given semester, be enrolled in all online courses.      |
| Executive Format Student                      | A student enrolled in an Executive Format Program.                                                                                                                                                         |
Policy/Procedures

2.0 Infrastructure

Blackboard is the online course management system used to deliver web-based distance learning courses and as a technology supplement for face-to-face taught courses. Through Blackboard, instructors may post course syllabi and other documents; incorporate online engagement tools (ex. Discussion boards, chat, announcements, file exchange, etc.); administer quizzes and exam; and post grades.

2.1 All online course material is delivered exclusively using the Blackboard learning management system, allowing instructors to take full advantage of a variety of technology tools with a user-friendly interface that meets accessibility standards for interoperability and access for learners with special needs. The Provost’s Office has compliance responsibility and authority to make sure no other learning management system is used, and monitors learning platforms used.

2.1.1 Southern Miss has invested and continues to invest in robust support infrastructure for faculty and students using Blackboard learning support technology. We strive for consistency and quality in the student learning experience, rigorous standards and review, security of student information and grades, as well as maintaining a reasonable cost to support faculty training, instructional design, and course development services. We achieve this by standardizing the institution on a single, core set of e-learning technologies.

2.1.1.1 Compliance with technology standards are demonstrated through institutional indicators shown below:

2.1.1.2 Course Architecture Indicators: Blackboard architecture permits the online teacher to add content, activities and assessments to extend learning opportunities and accommodate traditional and non-traditional schedules.

2.1.1.3 User Interface Indicators – Faculty are expected to utilize the officially endorsed university template within the Blackboard LMS. The purpose of a university-wide template for online courses is to ensure a consistent experience for our students. The template promotes best practices in syllabus requirements, design of instruction, course structure and organization, learner support and resources, learner interaction and collaboration, effective use of course technology, and assessment and evaluation.

2.1.1.4 Faculty may use third party tools as an enhancement to their course, not as a replacement for their course. Faculty choosing to utilize third party tools
(publisher content, course cartridges, etc.) will work with the third party vendor and the Blackboard support staff in the LEC to migrate content directly into the Blackboard course shell or to develop an official portal through the Blackboard course shell to gain access to other content and teaching materials not developed by the instructor. See the institutional policy at (add URL once policy is posted on IR site).

2.1.1.5 Technology Requirements and Interoperability Indicators for LEC:

2.1.1.5.1 Hardware, Web browser and software requirements are specified.

2.1.1.5.2 Prerequisite skills in the use of technology are identified.

2.1.1.5.3 Appropriate content-specific tools and software are utilized.

2.1.1.5.4 Interoperability technical standards allow sharing content from different learning management systems into the Blackboard platform, which is used exclusively as the USM learning management system.

2.1.1.5.5 Interoperability technical standards ensure sharing of question, assessments and results with others.

2.1.1.6 Accessibility Indicators:

2.1.1.6.1 The course meets universal design principles, Section 508 standards and W3C guidelines to ensure access for all students.

2.1.1.6.2 Online textbooks used in a course meet nationally endorsed standards (NIMAS) for publishers to ensure distribution of accessible, alternative versions of textbooks and other instructional materials.

2.1.1.7 Technical Support Indicators:

2.1.1.7.1 LEC offers the instructors assistance with technical support and course management.

2.1.1.7.2 Student support is provided by BB Student Support Services. Contact information for 24/7 support can be found on the Learning Enhancement Center website at https://lec.usm.edu/ under Quick Links tab.

2.1.1.7.3 LEC offers orientation, intermediate and advance training.
3.0 **Online Instructor Professional Development Program**

The LEC provides an ongoing program of appropriate technical, design, and production support for instructors conducting courses online. The University of Southern Mississippi strongly encourages all online instructors to complete the LEC Blackboard Training Program prior to teaching an online course. Information regarding training and support for online faculty can be found at [https://lec.usm.edu/faculty-help/](https://lec.usm.edu/faculty-help/). Instructors must demonstrate proficiency in the following areas prior to conducting online instruction:

3.1 **System Understanding** – Instructors are expected to independently access the online course management system; post course syllabi and other documents; incorporate online engagement tools (ex. Discussion boards, chat, announcements, file exchange, etc.); administer quizzes and exams, and post grades.

3.2 **Features/Capabilities** – Instructors are expected to develop and maintain an awareness and understanding of the basic instructional functions, features, and capabilities of the current online learning management system utilized by The University of Southern Mississippi (Blackboard). Examples of useful functions, features, and capabilities include: Assignment Dropbox, Grade Book, Notes, and Assessment Manager.

3.2.1 Faulty should secure access to high-speed bandwidth connection for all class activities.

3.2.2 It is highly recommended to test all course-related technology prior to the start of the course.

3.2.3 When selecting technology, faculty should understand the purpose of that technology and implement as necessary within each designated course.

3.2.4 Contact Blackboard support personnel in the Learning Enhancement Center for assistance with any technology related issues.

3.2.4.1 The University of Southern Mississippi professional development for online instructors may include, but is not limited to: learning communities, which allow instructors to work together in pairs or teams with opportunities for follow-up discussions to share information; online training modules; and face-to-face training; technology coaching or mentoring.
3.2.4.2 The online instructor professional development program shall address differences in learning styles and technical abilities. The professional development program shall incorporate collaborative learning activities and model effective teaching in an online environment.

3.2.4.3 Services are offered through the Learning Enhancement Center to:

3.2.4.3.1 Assist departments in the development of online courses and programs by providing high quality instructional design services, training, and marketing and recruiting services for fully online programs.

3.2.4.3.2 Provide adequate and appropriate training opportunities for faculty utilizing online learning tools opportunities for faculty utilizing online learning tools for both fully online and face-to-face courses.

3.2.4.3.3 Support University sanctioned online learning tools.

3.2.4.3.4 Provide a secure location and appropriate process for students to take proctored exams if required by the faculty of record. Proctoring policies are located at https://lec.usm.edu/proctoring/.

3.2.4.3.5 Develop and maintain an online faculty listserv.

3.2.4.3.6 Communicate critical information through the online faculty listserv in a timely manner regarding changes in technologies, upgrades, outages, and other information affecting access to courses both by faculty and students.

3.2.4.3.7 Maintain a stable and consistent environment for the delivery of online courses in collaboration with iTech and Blackboard.

3.2.4.3.8 Research, review, implement, and support emerging technologies that may prove beneficial to faculty and students utilizing online learning.

3.2.4.3.9 Ensure access to 24/7 support through Blackboard Student Support Services.
3.3 Evaluation

3.3.1 Evaluations may include, but are not limited to: diagnostic, formative (ongoing sharing between participant and instructor), and summative (to summarize participant learning).

3.3.2 Online instructor professional development training and support programs are evaluated regularly by the Office of the Provost. Program assessment data are routinely compared to national research in five areas: 1) participant reaction to online professional development, 2) participant learning, 3) organizational support, 4) participant implementation, and 5) student impact.

3.4 Constraints/Compliance – Course developers must create online course materials in accordance with the University of Southern Mississippi’s established requirements and guidelines within this policy.

3.4.1 Online course instruction must satisfy or exceed the various accreditation criteria and policy statements of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges.

3.4.2 Online Courses will also meet the standards established by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) for course content, evaluation and management.

3.4.3 Use of the online Learning standard template is required when new courses are developed.

4.0 FACULTY/INSTRUCTOR

Each department ensures a sufficient number of faculty are qualified to develop, design, and teach online courses/programs. Faculty are expected to create content and features in online courses for which they serve as subject matter experts and which demonstrate comprehension of the distinct characteristics of online instruction including:

4.1 Following the established and published course schedule.

4.2 Having the course developed and ready for student access on the official first day of class.

4.3 Providing a welcome or informational message and/or video for students within the home page of the course.
4.4 Developing a comprehensive course syllabus designed around one or more required textbooks or cases, with the course syllabus available on the first day of class.

4.5 Adhering to the syllabus including course milestones, due dates, and critical course activities.

4.6 Setting forth expectations for both students and instructor in the syllabus to ensure that students understand what is expected of them and what they can expect of the instructor.

4.7 Articulating the academic requirements for the course, including course objectives, assignments, participation requirements, examinations, and evaluation rubrics.

4.8 Developing instructional modules for the course, which include components of theory, practice, and assessment. These modules may be designed as weekly modules, two-week modules, or other appropriate module designs that adequately and appropriately deliver full content of the individual course over the full calendar of the semester. Recognizing the diverse disciplines offered through online learning, faculty may choose a variety of content delivery methods rather than modules or units within the Blackboard LMS. Instructional design assistance is available in the LEC.

4.9 Conduct (that is, “teach”) the course within the scheduled time frame.

4.10 Developing or providing assessment instruments to measure the academic progress of students using multiple approaches.

4.11 Communicating any schedule adjustments.

4.12 Identifying and correcting inaccurate course content, confusing information and/or instruction, broken links, and other course design issues.

4.13 Using the Blackboard gradebook functions to manage course assignments, assessments, and grade entry. The university does not endorse the use of e-mail or third party software for assignment and assessment submission or documentation of official university records.

4.14 Ensuring that all documents posted to the Blackboard course have received appropriate copyright clearance or have been determined to qualify for academic fair use. Assistance for copyright and fair use policies is available through the University Libraries.
5.0 Communication and Availability
The faculty are expected to be available to the online learner for the duration of the course. Timely instructor feedback and communication is essential for the online learner in order to manage their learning experience. For this purpose, faculty should employ the email function embedded within the institutionally provided and supported LMS. In addition the instructor is expected to:

5.1 Post online office hours and be available during the designated times. The LEC can assist faculty with a variety of tools to make the office hours experience more personal and meaningful to both the faculty and student.

5.2 Clearly communicate student expectations.

5.3 Communicate instructor class schedule and availability, as well as response times to emails, discussion board activities, and other forms of communication where students will expect a response from the instructor.

5.4 Actively participate in course-related discussions, chats, and activities where appropriate. Remember, online learning is an active, engaged process, not an independent study course.

5.5 Regularly access the online course. Best practices suggest that faculty access the course at least every 24 to 48 hours.

5.6 Give prior notice to students and appropriate administrative/academic units if you are unable to log into the course, if you may be unavailable for an extended period of time, or if you experience any technical issues that would prohibit communication in, or instruction of, the course.

5.7 Feedback - Feedback on assignments and assessments is most helpful to students when it is provided promptly and when clear and concise language is used to explain the degree to which relevant course outcomes have been met. The instructor is expected to communicate to students when they can expect to receive graded feedback on assignments and exams, and whenever exceptions to announced and appropriate time frames for feedback occur:

5.8 Provide prompt feedback. Communicated to students when they can expect to receive graded feedback on assignments and exams.

5.9 Inform the student of when they can expect a response if the instructor cannot provide a detailed response when originally documented in the class schedule or syllabus.
5.10 Provide clear and concise feedback to explain the degree to which the student is achieving the course/lesson outcomes.

6.0 **Electronic Curriculum and Instruction**

Methods change, but standards of quality endure. The important issues are not technical but curriculum-driven and pedagogical. Decisions about such matters are made by qualified professionals and focus on learning outcomes for an increasingly diverse student population and faculty should consider and understand the following:

6.1 Quality outcome courses include clearly defined curriculum content, effective and easy-to-use ways for students to interact with and learn the content, and are designed to attract student interest.

6.1.1 Communication and Interaction indicators: The design of the course should provide opportunities for appropriate instructor-student interaction, including timely and frequent feedback about student progress. The course provides opportunities for appropriate student-student interaction to foster mastery and application of the material and a plan for monitoring that interaction.

6.1.2 Resources and Materials Indicators: The course provides opportunities for appropriate student interaction with the content to foster mastery and application of the material. Students have access to resources that enrich the course content.

6.1.3 Instructional Design Service: LEC provides instructional design services and online faculty members are encouraged to use these services to maximize delivery of their online course.

6.1.4 Course Management and Instruction: An effective online course should be examined as to the difference in presentation of learning strategies than used in a face-to-face course. The instructor is responsible for exercising demonstrated best practices in managing and teaching the class from start to finish. (refer to section 3.0 for a complete detailed list)

6.2 Consortia Partners and Contractors – Although important elements of a program may be supplied by consortia partners or outsources to other organizations, including contractors who may not be accredited, the responsibility for performance remains with the institution awarding the degree or certificate. It is the institution in which the student is enrolled, not its suppliers nor partners, who has a contract with the student. Therefore, the criteria for selecting consortia partners and contractor, and the means to monitor and evaluate their work, are important aspects of the program plan.
In considering consortia agreements, attention is given to issues such as assuring that enhancing service to students is a primary consideration and that incentives do not compromise the integrity of the institution or of the education program. Consideration is also given to the effect of administrative arraignments and cost-sharing on an institution’s decision-making regarding curriculum.

6.2.1 Performance expectations are defined in authorized University memoranda of understanding, contracts, and agreements. Conditions for contract termination are also defined.

6.2.2 Adequate quality control and curriculum oversight provisions are included in agreements concerning courseware.

6.2.3 Appropriate system reliability and emergency backup guarantees exist in agreements concerning technology services.

6.2.4 Provision for protection of confidentiality and privacy in services involving personally identifiable information included.

6.2.5 Assurances concerning qualification and training of persons involved in contact with students are defined, ranging from help desk to tutoring or counseling.

6.2.6 Articulation and transfer arrangements are applicable to courses offered via the consortium, which involve specific curricular decisions by the academic structures of the participating institutions.

6.3 Student Accessibility – In designing an electronically offered degree or certificate program, the institution provides a coherent plan for the student to access all courses necessary to complete the program, or clearly notifies the students of requirements not included in the electronic offering. Hybrid programs or courses, mixing electronic and on-campus elements, are designed to assure that all students have access to appropriate services.

6.3.1 Students are notified of program requirements via Online@Southern Miss.

6.3.2 If the institution relies on other University approved providers to offer program-related courses, students are informed of these courses via Eagle Learning Online.

6.3.3 The total online program is realistically available to students for whom it is intended. For example, the chosen technology is likely to be
accessible by the target student population and target students meet the parameters of program scheduling.

6.3.4 Students with a disability which qualifies under the American with Disabilities Act (ADA) and requires accommodations should contact The University of Southern Mississippi Office for Disability Accommodations (ODA) for information on appropriate policies and procedures. Disabilities covered by the ADA may include learning, psychiatric, physical disabilities or chronic health disorders. Students can contact ODA at http://www.usm.edu/oda if they are not certain whether a medical condition/disability qualifies.

7.0 Student Support
Colleges and universities have learned that the twenty-first century student is different, both demographically and geographically, from students of previous generations. These differences affect everything from admissions policy to library services.

7.1 Library and Learning Resources:

7.1.1 Students have access to and can effectively use appropriate library resources.

7.1.2 Access is provided to laboratories, facilities, and equipment appropriate to the courses or programs.

7.2 Student Services:

7.2.1 Students have adequate access to the range of services appropriate to support the programs offered through Online @ Southern Miss.

7.2.2 Students in Online @ Southern Miss programs have an adequate procedure for resolving their complaints, and the institution follows its policies and procedures.

7.2.3 Advertising, recruiting, and admissions information adequately and accurately represent the programs, requirements, and services available to students.

7.2.4 Documented procedures assure that security of personal information is protected in the conduct of assessments and evaluations and in the dissemination of results.
7.2.5 Students enrolled in Online @ Southern Miss courses are able to use the technology employed, have the equipment necessary to succeed, and are provided assistance in using the technology employed.

7.3 The institution recognizes that appropriate services must be available for students of electronically offered programs, using the working assumption that these students will not be physically present on campus. With variations for specific situations and programs, these services, which are possibly coordinated, may include:

7.3.1 Accurate and timely information about the institution, its programs, courses, costs and related policies and requirements.

7.3.2 Pre-registration advising.

7.3.3 Application for admission.

7.3.4 Placement testing.

7.3.5 Enrollment/registration in programs and courses.

7.3.6 Financial aid, including information about policies and limitations, information about available scholarships, processing of applications, and administration of financial aid and scholarship awards.

7.4 A sense of community is important to the success of many students. An ongoing, long-term relationship with Online @ Southern Miss students is beneficial to both student and institution. Strategies and practices to build community are implemented in Online @ Southern Miss programs as appropriate, through such actions as encouraging study groups, providing student directories (with the permission of those listed), including off-campus students in institutional publications and events, including these students in definitions of the academic community through such mechanisms as student government representation, invitations to campus events including graduation ceremonies, and similar strategies of inclusion.

8.0 Evaluation & Assessment
Both the assessment of student achievement and evaluation of the overall program take on added importance as new techniques evolve. For example, in asynchronous programs the element of seat time is essentially removed from the equation. For
these reasons, the institution conducts sustained, evidence-based and participatory inquiry as to whether Online @ Southern Miss programs are achieving objectives. The results of such inquiries are used to guide curriculum design and delivery, pedagogy, and educational processes, and may affect future policy and budgets and perhaps have implications for the institution’s roles and mission.

8.1 The following Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) Commission on Colleges policy standards apply:

8.1.1 Student Assessment – When examinations are employed (paper, online, demonstrations of competency, etc.), they take place in circumstances that include firm student identification. The institution otherwise seeks to assure the integrity of student work.

8.1.2 Guidelines for examination by proctor are on the Online @ Southern Miss website. Policies and procedures define faculty, student and LEC responsibilities for proctored exams, including but not limited to establishing student identity, assuring security of test instrument, administering the examinations, and assuring secure examinations and prompt evaluation.

8.1.3 If other methods are used to identify those who take the examination, how is identification firmly established? How are the conditions of the examination (security, time limits, etc.) controlled?

8.1.4 Does the institution have in place effective policies and procedures to assure the integrity of student work?

8.2 Institutional Assessment and Reporting.

8.3 Accreditation Measures/Self-Evaluation.

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**Review**

The Director of the Learning Enhancement Center is responsible for the review of this policy every four years (or whenever circumstances require immediate review).

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**Forms/Instructions**

N/A

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**Appendices**
References


References (from Expectations Document)


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