DISTANCE LEARNING

I. Policy Statement and Purpose

Athens State University strives to ensure that courses offered via distance learning meet the same quality standards and follow the same guidelines and policies, where appropriate, as those that apply to traditional campus-based instruction.

The purpose of the Athens State University Distance Learning policy is to assure high quality in the delivery of distance learning with regard to instruction and procedures in accordance with the mission and goals of the University. This policy serves as a supplement to existing policies in relationship to distance learning courses and technology.

The intent of this policy is to assist in the implementation of best practices in the delivery of distance learning courses at Athens State University. To that end, the document follows the Southern Association of College and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) "Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs" and in the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions' (C-RAC)"Interregional Guidelines for the Evaluation of Distance Education". Additionally, standards set forth by accrediting bodies such as the Association for Collegiate Business School Programs (ACBSP) and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the Accrediting Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) were consulted in construction of this policy.

II. Oversight of Distance Learning Instruction

Distance Learning courses are comparable to traditional courses in terms of course descriptions, expectations and learning outcomes. Like all academic activities, distance learning at Athens State University operates under the purview of the Office of the Provost/Vice President of Academic Affairs.

III. Definitions

Distance Learning - is a formal educational process in which the majority of the instruction and interaction occurs when students and instructors are not in the same physical space using one or

Policy Number: II.13
Policy Level: Operating Policy
Originally Issued: March 20, 2012
Revised: April 20, 2015
Revised: October 2, 2017
Revised: January 23, 2020
Policy Owner: Provost/Vice President for Academic Affairs
Policy Implementation: Associate VP for Academic Affairs
SACSCOC Standard: 10.1, 10.2, 10.6, 14.3

more technologies. Instruction may be synchronous or asynchronous with regular and substantive interaction.

Asynchronous - Means "not at the same time." Asynchronous tools, such as e-mail and discussion board, allow participants to communicate without having to be online at the same time.

Synchronous – Means "occurring at the same time." Synchronous tools, such as text chat, audio chat or video chat, allow all participants to be online at the same time.

Delivery Mode – Refers to the primary method or technology used to deliver instructional information to the students and used for communication between faculty and students. At Athens State University, courses are delivered in the following delivery modes:

Distance Learning Courses are taught 100% online using a combination of asynchronous and voluntary synchronous activities. This type of course runs in primarily an asynchronous format.   Students are not required to attend classes at a specific location or at a specific time. No required synchronous activities are permitted in a DL Online Course, although synchronous sessions are permitted.

DL Synchronous Courses are a specialized subset of Distance Learning Courses. These courses are taught 100% online, but make use of scheduled synchronous online sessions. This type of course runs in primarily an asynchronous format, but will have live sessions delivered in an online format. Students are not required to attend a specific location, but synchronous live sessions are required.   For these courses, the days and times for the synchronous sessions must be published in the University's Official Course Schedule prior to registration.

Blended Courses are a blend of distance learning with the traditional classroom environment. Students meet face-to-face for 49% or less of the course and complete the rest of their coursework online. Face-to-face sessions will be scheduled at a specific location on specified days and times. Dates, times and locations for face-to-face meetings must be published in the University's Official Class Schedule.

Blended courses are not intended to bring students to a set location simply to take exams. The live sessions should be designed to enhance the educational experience and interaction between faculty and students.

All courses that require laboratories and clinical site visits that cannot be completed via technology-based distance learning are handled with special arrangements made by the faculty member and the College Dean.

Traditional courses are taught 100% in a face-to-face classroom setting. The syllabus and other materials may be posted online and students may be asked to submit some work electronically. Classes will be scheduled for a specific location during specified days and times. Dates, times and locations will be published in the University's Official Course Schedule

IV. Distance Learning Infrastructure

Athens State University provides the necessary equipment, software and facilities to effectively deliver   courses. The University provides a learning management system for the   delivery of programs and course materials through the internet. All courses, whether traditional, online, or blended, must be placed on the University's learning management system.   Support services for distance learning technologies and processes are provided to faculty and students through the University Help Desk. Computers with Internet access are available on campus for students who may need to use campus facilities for distance learning purposes.

The minimum computer system specifications required to use the learning management system will be developed and published by Academic Technology and posted to the student Help Desk website.

Use of Third Party Courses

Distance learning courses are available from other colleges, universities, corporations or non-profit organizations. In the event that Athens State University wishes to freely adopt, purchase or lease modules or entire courses from a Third Party, such courses or modules must be evaluated by the Curriculum Committee and College Dean to ensure that the materials meet all quality and accessibility requirements established by the University, before purchasing or signing any legal agreements.

Use of External / Third Party Websites

Athens State University's current learning management system is to be used to host all academic courses. The university also supports a variety of instructional technologies to assist with the delivery of courses.   Third party tools that are not an adopted standard may have limited technical support.

Faculty members who incorporate these tools into their courses should be prepared to offer technical assistance to faculty and students if needed.

Learning Management System Updates and Changes

Planned upgrades and enhancements to any instructional technology such as the learning management system are to occur between the spring and summer semesters only. Planned upgrades will be communicated to the campus no later than March 1. Appropriate documentation and training will be made available   in preparation for the changes.

Unplanned maintenance that must be applied more immediately to address usability and security related issues will be communicated to students and faculty as soon as possible with updates applied the following Sunday morning.

V. Academic Affairs Distance Learning Course Management and Delivery Requirements

Maximum Class Sizes and Faculty Teaching Load

Whereas traditional course caps are defined by a number of variables including the number of seats in the classroom, under normal circumstances, a distance learning course that requires intensive communication and collaboration should have a maximum class size of 25 students. Exceptions to the maximum class size will be reviewed by the College Dean and require the approval of the Provost.

Faculty members teaching distance learning courses receive the same credit toward their teaching load as do faculty who teach traditional courses. The decision as to how many distance learning courses a faculty member may teach is left to the discretion of the College Dean.

Merger of Online Courses

Faculty members teaching multiple sections of a course are not allowed to merge these sections into a single course shell in the learning management system. Pedagogically, combining individual classes would affect class size, course delivery and the quality of instruction.

Cross-listed sections of a course will be merged into a single course shell in our learning management system. This exception is allowed because cross-listed sections have a combined maximum class size and are treated as one course for determining teaching load.

Exceptions to this policy may be made by the Office of the Provost/Vice President of Academic Affairs.

Course Availability Dates

The availability of a course in the learning management system (LMS) is governed by the following rules:

1. Courses will be accessible at   8:00 a.m. on the first day of class as published in the university's academic calendar. However, faculty are required to post a syllabus for each class in the learning management system at least five (5) days prior to the start of the semester. The syllabus must be set to allow "Guest Access" so students can begin preparing for the upcoming semester.
2. Courses from the prior semester are removed from the learning management system 42 calendar days (6 weeks) after the last day of the semester as published in the academic calendar, except courses in which students received an incomplete (see # 5 below).
3. Empty course shells for the next semester will be accessible to all faculty members fourteen (14) calendar days before registration opens for the next semester.
4. Student access to a course ends at 8:00 a.m. three (3) calendar days after the last day of the semester as published in the semester schedule.
5. If one or more students in a course receive an "incomplete":

- The course will not be removed from the learning management system as normal.

- The student(s) that received the incomplete will remain in the same course in the learning management system for up to a maximum of one additional semester to complete remaining work. Although students will have access to the course for the entire duration of the semester, it is up to the faculty member of the course as to how long a student has to complete the work. The faculty member is permitted to use the Date Availability tools in the LMS to limit the amount of time students have to complete the remaining work.
- The student(s) will not have access to the course in the learning management system during the break between semesters.

Student Interaction Requirements

Student interactions between faculty and classmates are extremely important in distance learning courses and differentiate a distance learning course from a correspondence course. Therefore, the following must take place in any course incorporating distance learning technologies:

- Feedback and communication expectations of faculty by students must be stated in the course syllabus (ex: expected turnaround time on grading, expected response time to student inquiries, etc.)
- Faculty are to have weekly communication with their students and are to provide timely feedback on activities and assessments.
- Courses must include instructional technologies that facilitate student-to-student interaction (ex: discussion boards, blogs, wikis, etc.). These interactions should be distributed throughout the duration of a course and at a minimum, 33% of a course's weeks should have an element of student-to-student interaction. For example, if a course is scheduled for 15 weeks, student-to-student interaction should be found within at least 5 of those weeks

Course Schedule and Duration

Distance learning courses must be designed to be completed over the duration of the term specified in the Athens State University Class schedule. Therefore, the following items must be included in all courses referred to in this policy:

Policy Number: II.13
Policy Level: Operating Policy
Originally Issued: March 20, 2012
Revised: April 20, 2015
Revised: October 2, 2017
Revised: January 23, 2020
Policy Owner: Provost/Vice President for Academic Affairs
Policy Implementation: Associate VP for Academic Affairs
SACSCOC Standard: 10.1, 10.2, 10.6, 14.3

- A course schedule with   due dates for all assessments and activities throughout the course must be available to students at the start of the class. Assessment of students and course activities should be appropriately paced throughout the duration of the course. In the event that an activity or a due date must be adjusted, the faculty member must notify the students as to the change.

- The final exam of a course must be assigned during exam week as specified on the official academic calendar. (See *Academic Calendar and Class Scheduling* Policy)

Academic Integrity

Athens State University supports the SACSCOC *Distance and Correspondence Education Policy Statement* that states "…the institution must demonstrate that the student who registers in a distance or correspondence education course or program is the same student who participates in and completes the course or program and receives the credit by verifying the identity of a student who participates in class or coursework by using, at the option of the institution, methods such as (1) a secure login and pass code, (2) proctored examinations, and (3) new or other technologies and practices that are effective in verifying student identification."

Athens State University uses the following technologies to support distance learning academic integrity:

1) **Learning Management System Security Login**: Athens State University issues individual user accounts and passwords to each student enrolling at the University. Distance learning course content is accessible through a secure login to the learning management system Blackboard.

2) **Proctored Exams and Identity Checks**: Athens State University uses **Honorlock™** for on-demand, web-accessible, remote exam proctoring that records student exam sessions using a webcam and flags any behavior or actions that are not allowed during exam sessions. Students are required to present a government issued photo ID for each **Honorlock™** proctored exam session.

3) **University Issued Email Account For All Communications**: Students and faculty are required to use University issued email accounts for all course related communications. Additionally, the University Help Desk uses **secure processes to ensure the identity of students** when providing assistance with login credentials to the learning management system and email.

4) **SafeAssign** -**Plagiarism** This tool may be enabled for any major term paper or writing project to review assignments for originality and to help students identify how to properly attribute sources.

VI.   Examinations

Examinations will be given as scheduled. The faculty member is not obligated to repeat or remind students of examination due dates. It is the student's responsibility to acquire necessary materials from the course in the learning management system. No make-up examinations will be given unless approved by the faculty member.

In the event that a student taking a distance learning course (within the guidelines specified in the definitions section) is unable to take an examination online, or is required to take an in-person proctored examination, the faculty member is normally expected to serve as the proctor for the student. The faculty member may proctor exams in a face- to-face setting or using remote proctoring technologies.

If the student is unable to be proctored by the faculty member, an alternative proctor may be used. Options include the following:

- The Testing Center at Athens State University or the Testing Center at another institution of higher education or military installation can proctor the exam.
- A corporate Testing Center can proctor the exam; however, students should be notified in advance of any costs associated with this option.
- An individual approved by the department chair of the course can proctor the exam, as discussed below.
    - Proctors shall not be degree-seeking students at Athens State University or the educational institution administering the exam.
    - Proctors may not authorize others to serve as temporary substitute proctors unless those individuals acting as substitutes are authorized by the institution to be proctors.
    - Proctors shall not be a social acquaintance or relative of a student taking the exam.
    - Proctors shall not be a co-worker of the person taking the exam.
    - Proctors shall not be a subordinate who operates within the line of authority of the person taking the exam.

o   Proctors shall be cognizant of the proper role of a test administrator; such training shall include familiarity with Athens State University policies affecting the administration of exams in a proctored setting.

Proctored Testing for Overseas/Military Students:
Test proctors chosen by the students must be approved by the faculty member. The proctor should be someone in the institution/company/military who is in a supervisory or human resource position and cannot be a peer or an immediate supervisor. Preferably, the proctor for military students should be someone from the appropriate military testing center.

VII. Faculty Responsibilities (Course Delivery)

Faculty Requirements and Responsibilities
Faculty at Athens State University are committed to the success of our students and the University. To ensure quality teaching, regardless of delivery format, all faculty must meet and adhere to all requirements listed in the *Faculty Credentials* policy and the *Faculty Job Description* and *Guidelines-Faculty Expectations,* and must be evaluated annually by the criteria outlined in the *Procedures for Faculty Evaluations.*

Faculty teaching distance learning courses are expected to develop and maintain currency with the latest technologies and pedagogical techniques by participating in   professional development activities such as workshops, one-on-one support sessions or   self-study. In order to ensure faculty are proficient in the use of the online instructional tools used by Athens State University, faculty who have not previously taught distance learning or blended courses for Athens State University are required to successfully complete an online orientation and / or proficiency exam prior to teaching their first course. It is the responsibility of Academic Technology Services to provide and maintain the faculty training(s) and exam(s).

Faculty are responsible for course content, course content accessibility, delivery of instruction, evaluating student progress, assessing learning outcomes, and timely communication in a distance learning course. Faculty will evaluate courses every semester in which a particular course is taught to determine currency of materials.   It is the responsibility of the faculty to ensure that the rigor of programs and quality of instruction are maintained within all courses.

Official Email

Athens State University provides each faculty member and student with an official e-mail account. All instructional technologies used by the university are tied to and operated using these official email accounts. Students, faculty, and staff, are required to use their official email account for all course related correspondence and when conducting official university business. Additionally, students and faculty are responsible for checking their official Athens State email accounts frequently.

Student Attendance

The U.S. Department of Education requires the University to verify student attendance in each course before financial aid funds can be disbursed. The U.S. Department of Education will not accept the simple act of logging into the University's learning management system as proof of attendance. Verification of student attendance must be accomplished by the completion of a faculty-assigned academic activity. The Office of Student Financial Services will keep faculty apprised of the first financial aid disbursement date and will provide instructions on how to report student attendance through the online attendance tracking software application. Faculty will report student attendance via the attendance tracker by the published deadline.

At the end of each semester, faculty members must report a last date of attendance for any student receiving a "W", "F" or "I" grade. The last day on which the student completed an academic activity within the course should be used to determine the last day of attendance.

Confidentiality of Student Information

Athens State University complies with the provisions of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) of 1974 as amended. FERPA sets forth the requirements pertaining to the privacy of student records. The law governs the release of education records and access to the records. Please see the University's *Privacy of Student Records – Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)* policy for additional information.

Copyright Compliance and Intellectual Property

Faculty are expected to understand and adhere to the standards outlined in the *Copyright Compliance: Use of Copyrighted Materials, Guidelines for Copyright Compliance at Athens State University* and the *Intellectual Property: Ownership of Created Works* policies.

Timely Responses to Students

While courses are in session, faculty members teaching fully online distance learning courses are normally expected to respond to student e-mails in a timely manner. Refer to the *Faculty Expectations* Policy for more information.

VIII. Institutional Responsibilities

Institutional Assessment

The viability of distance learning programs is included in the University's planning process. Distance learning is planned to meet the University's mission, strategic initiatives, goals and objectives, and is consistent with the University's long-range plan. Distance learning is designed and evaluated according to the same guidelines used for traditional programs. The effectiveness of distance

learning is assessed as discussed in this document. Finally, the results of the assessment are used to make appropriate changes to the program and the University's long- range plan.

Marketing of Distance Learning Programs

Advertising, recruiting, and admissions information adequately and accurately represents current distance learning courses, requirements, and services available to students. Athens State University advertises all courses each semester both online and in print.

Student Services for Distance Learning Students

Departments offering various student and academic services to traditional students must ensure that there is an equivalent method of offering the same services to distance learning students. Both traditional and distance learning students should have access to the same processes and procedures required for student functions such as applying for admission, registering for classes, checking course availability, accessing financial aid, accessing counseling services, accessing academic advising, etc.

Help Desk Services for Distance Learning Students

The Help Desk provides all students with a centralized point of contact for technical support services. The Help Desk can assist with login credentials, passwords, email, Blackboard issues, and online course related software. Help Desk services are available on campus in the CB 102; by email at helpdesk@athens.edu; and by phone at 256-216-6698.

Library Resources for Distance Learning Students

The University ensures that students participating in distance learning courses have access to adequate and appropriate learning resources. Students have access to the University Library and its resources, and also the virtual library resources within the State of Alabama. Library services for distance students include access to the book and periodical holdings through the Library web site, encompassing a sizable repository of electronic books, online databases, and full-text online journals. The Library also provides interlibrary loan services and a variety of means for online research assistance. In addition, students may e-mail or phone the library. Distance learning students may access the online library resources by using authentication procedures that are provided by the Library. The University regularly assesses the effectiveness of library resources and services in all formats and modes of delivery.

Student Complaints/Grievance Procedure

The University provides a defined process by which a student who has a valid complaint or grievance may pursue resolution of the matter of concern. This process is outlined in the *Student Grievance Procedure.*

Accessibility Services for Students

ADA Statement: Athens State University complies with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. Athens State University strives to provide a dynamic and appropriate instructional environment and workplace to meet the needs of students, employees, and citizens of the communities served. It is the policy of the University that a good faith effort shall be made to meet the accommodation requests of persons with disabilities.

Faculty should include the following statement in the course syllabus so students can be aware of the services available at the University:

Students who need accommodations should notify their instructor(s) and contact the Accessibility Services Specialist at 256.233.8143 or through the Athens State University Accessibility Services website.

IX. Sample Syllabus

When designing distance learning courses, it is important to note that a distance learning course is not to be designed as a self-study or self-paced course. Additionally, the course syllabus will follow

University, College and Department guidelines, be clearly written and easily located by students. Examples of information that should be included in the syllabus are:

- Course number, course title, number of credit hours, course description, and prerequisites.
- Information on the textbook(s) and other required materials.
- Technology/Software requirements.
- Faculty member's name, telephone number, Athens State University e-mail address, and office hours (both in a physical and electronic format to include virtual office hours).
- Course Objectives, Course Requirements, and Course Outcomes.
- Communication guidelines.
- Feedback guidelines.
- Dates for required synchronous activities, if any.
- Evaluation criteria that clearly identify the assessment activities to be completed by students and the value of each. Short descriptions of each assessment activity.
- Course policies, such as the handling of late submissions, makeup work.
- Link to or short paragraph of University policies on Disability Accommodation and Academic Misconduct.
- Expectation of Student-to-Student Interaction

X. Responsibility for this Operating Policy

Policy Owner

As part of the initial approval of this policy by the President and subsequent to the original dissemination of the policy, the Provost/Vice President for Academic Affairs is the policy owner for the ongoing evaluation, review, and approval of this policy. Subsequent reviews and revisions to this policy must be in accordance with approved operating policy procedures and processes.

This policy will be reviewed every two years or more frequently as needed by the Policy Owner. Revisions will be reviewed/affirmed by the Faculty Senate and the Cabinet and approved by the University President. This policy will be updated/published in the University's Policy Library.

Responsibility for Policy Implementation

The President has assigned the responsibility of implementing this policy to the Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs.