

Ohio University Guidance on HLC Requirements

HLC Requirements for Changes to Program Modality

New Federal Regulations effective July 1, 2020 required changes to The Higher Learning Commission's (HLC, Ohio University's institutional accreditor) Substantive Change policies and processes including for approval or notification of changes to an existing program's method of delivery—for example, changing a program from in person to distance education or if a method of delivery is no longer offered. As OHIO has the highest level of distance education delivery approval, these new regulations require OHIO to make a notification to HLC when there is a change to program modality.

However, as of January 2021, the Department of Education retracted the Dear Colleague Letter GEN-06-17. This guidance had been interpreted to mean that an institution's distance education programs were not required to be evaluated or approved if the institution did not offer more than 50% of its courses via distance education, have more than 50% of its students enrolled in distance education, or offer more than 50% of an educational program via distance education. Unfortunately, the Department determined that these standards conflicted with federal regulations that reference programs offered "in whole or in part" through telecommunications for purposes of Title IV Eligibility and therefore, have revoked this guidance.

Referencing the important definitions below, a program refers to all of the organized instruction or study that leads to an academic credential. Thus, for undergraduate programs, a program includes both the general education and major requirements to complete the degree and may include additional college requirement. Open electives (where students can take any course to fulfill the requirement) at any level are not considered part of the program of organized instruction and thus, would not be considered in the determination of whether a program must be declared as a distance education program. However, if electives are limited in anyway (restricted electives, e.g., take three course from this list of six courses, then those would be considered part of the program of organized instruction.

As the result of these changes, any program where a student could take **one or more distance education courses** (see definition below) which would apply to their major, college, or general education requirements, must be considered a distance education program and OHIO must make a notification to HLC to that effect.

In addition, if a distance education program no longer offers at least one distance education course that a student can choose to take to satisfy a general education, college, or major requirement, that program can no longer be considered a distance education program and OHIO must notify HLC that the distance education program is no longer offered.

Please note the following definitions:

Federal Definition of a Program:

"A legally authorized postsecondary program of organized instruction or study that:

- i. Leads to an academic, professional, or vocational degree, or certificate, or other recognized educational credential, or is a comprehensive transition and postsecondary program, as described in 34 CFR part 668, subpart O; and,*
- ii. May, in lieu of credit hours or clock hours as a measure of student learning, utilize direct assessment of student learning, or recognize the direct assessment of student learning by others,*

Ohio University Guidance on HLC Requirements

if such assessment is consistent with the accreditation of the institution or program utilizing the results of the assessment and with the provisions of 34 CFR § 668.10.”

Distance education course: a course in which at least 75% of the instruction and interaction occurs using one or more of the technologies listed in the definition of distance education, with the faculty and students physically separated from each other.

Distance education program: an academic program offered in whole or in part through distance education, regardless of whether a face-to-face, on-ground, or residential option is also available.

IMPORTANT note: OHIO does not currently have any approvals to offer competency-based education (CBE) programs. This guidance does not apply to CBE programs and additional steps and processes are required for OHIO to start a CBE program. Please contact OHIO’s Accreditation Liaison Officer (ALO), Loralyn Taylor, Associate Provost for Institutional Effectiveness and Analytics for more information.

Federal Regulatory Reference: 34 CFR §602.22 (b) and 34 CFR 668.6 (m)

HLC Policy: [INST.F.20.040](#) Substantive Change and related policies

For more information see: [Substantive Change: Distance or Correspondence Education | Accreditation \(hlcommission.org\)](#)

For programs who are determined to meet the definition of a distance education program:

After the initial determination of whether a program meets the definition of a distance education program, program status will be reviewed on the schedule below. If a program no longer meets the definition of a distance education program at that point, the program will notify OHIO’s Accreditation Liaison Officer who will provide further information.

Time periods for review of distance education program status:

Degree/Credential	Status Review Period
Associate degrees	3 years
Baccalaureate degrees	6 years
Undergrad Certificates	6 years
Master’s degrees	
<40 credits	6 years
≥40 credits	7 years
Grad Certificates	
<15 credits	3 years
≥15 credits	4 years
Doctoral degrees	7 years

For programs who do not meet the definition of a distance education program in the initial determination.

If a non-distance education program intends to offer one of their courses meeting a major, college, general education, or other degree requirement online or via distance education, the program must immediately notify OHIO’s ALO for further information. The ALO will then notify HLC of the program’s change in modality.

Ohio University Guidance on HLC Requirements