

Recommended Guidelines for Evaluation of Online/Distance Learning Service Providers

(NCPSA, ver. 1.0)



NCPSA members are often asked to accept or award credit for educational experiences that their students receive through third-party online/distance service providers. Online/distance learning service providers are organizations that develop and provide various types of learning services to schools such as curricula, instructional materials, and programs.

Described herein are six broad based guidelines and specific indicators of best practices for online/distance learning service providers. The guidelines are based on the assumption that the school is granting the credit for a course and not the learning service provider. (See *Best Practices for Distance Education in K-12 Schools*, point 2d.) The guidelines are derived from available research and established good practice in the field of education and are intended to provide the architecture on which online/distance learning service providers can build their services. These services should always focus on organizational effectiveness that leads to quality student learning.

1. Vision, Purpose, and Commitment

Quality online/distance learning service providers have a mission statement that clearly defines the distinctive vision and purpose of the organization.

- 1.1. The online/distance learning service provider has a clearly stated mission that communicates a shared purpose and direction and guides the services it provides to others.
- 1.2. The mission and goals of the online/distance learning service provider are clearly articulated to stakeholders and are in alignment with the mission and goals of the school.
- 1.3. The online/distance learning service provider's administration structure, budgets, policies, and procedures reflect the mission of the organization and support its goals.
- 1.4. The online/distance learning service provider examines and evaluates its mission goals regularly.

2. Governance

The online/distance learning service provider provides governance and organizational structure that supports the organization in fulfilling its mission.

- 2.1. The online/distance learning service provider assures adequate human resources, technology, physical plant facilities, and budget to support its mission and goals.
- 2.2. Establishes a governance structure that is consistent with and supports the mission of the organization.
- 2.3. Has clearly defined roles for each level of governance, ie., board, executive, administration, leadership, etc.
- 2.4. Ensures compliance with all applicable local, state, and federal safety and health standards and regulations.
- 2.5. Establishes and implements clear, well-understood processes by which any curricular materials evolve from conception to administrative and faculty authentication to implementation.
- 2.6. Establishes clearly defined, articulated, and communicated policies dealing with services provided.
- 2.7. Provisions are made for protection of confidentiality and privacy in services involving personal information.
- 2.8. Has a third-party agreement outlining their relationship with each school to which it is providing services.

3. Teaching and Learning/Curriculum

Quality online/distance education is dependent on many essential factors such as:

- a) Quality curriculum design
 - b) Imaginative, engaged, and qualified staff
 - c) A comprehensive delivery system agent
- 3.1 Develops and implements curriculum based on clearly defined expectations for student learning.
 - 3.2 Promotes active involvement of students in the learning process, including opportunities for them to explore application.
 - 3.3 Designs and uses instructional strategies, innovations, and activities that are research-based and reflective of best practice.

- 3.4 Offers a curriculum that challenges each student to excel, reflects a commitment to equity, and demonstrates an appreciation of various points of view.
- 3.5 Allocates and protects instructional time to support student learning.
- 3.6 Implements interventions to help students meet their educational goals.
- 3.7 Ensures an atmosphere of eager learning.
- 3.8 All online/distance courses and course materials have the same academic rigor compared to the same course offered in a face-to-face classroom.
- 3.9 Programs and courses are developed by academically qualified persons responsible for curriculum development.
- 3.10 Programs and courses are developed, delivered, and evaluated to be complete and coherent.
- 3.11 Facilitators, if used, are academically prepared and sufficiently trained to allow them to be beneficial to students and to support the learning process.
- 3.12 The student has access to all needed supplementary materials, research materials, technology, and services to allow them to be successful.
- 3.13 Students for a particular class/course are able to meet the time structures, constraints, and schedule of the class.
- 3.14 Advisors and faculty ensure student awareness, understanding, and capacity to meet the evaluative criteria for the course.
- 3.15 That there are mechanisms in place to ensure adequate and appropriate teacher-student interaction (both synchronous and asynchronous) to maximize student learning and to allow for student questions.
- 3.16 Teacher response to student assignments, tests, and questions are timely and appropriate.
- 3.17 A secure, accurate, and complete student records system, both academic and financial, is maintained in accordance with state and federal regulations.
- 3.18 Uses a secure, stable, and comprehensive learning management system that is available to all students.

4. Faculty Support

Since instructors are essential to quality online education, investment in human resources and faculty support is fundamental to the goal of quality student learning.

- 4.1 In the development and implementation of electronically delivered courses, issues such as faculty workload, compensation, ownership of intellectual property, and faculty evaluation are mutually agreed upon and based on policy.
- 4.2 The organization provides appropriate training, technological support, and professional development for faculty and support personnel.
- 4.3 The organization provides appropriate support services specifically related to distance education.
- 4.4 The course architecture permits the teacher to add content, activities, and assessments to extend the learning opportunities.
- 4.5 The teacher meets the professional teaching standards established by the organization and/or the state licensing agency or the teacher has academic credentials in the field in which they are teaching and has been trained to teach in the modality being used for instruction.
- 4.6 All staff, tutors, and facilitators are suitable for their positions and possess appropriate qualifications and experience.
- 4.7 Long-range planning, budgeting and policy development processes reflect the facilities, staffing, professional development, equipment and other resources essential to the viability and effectiveness of the distance education curricula offered through, or supported by the organization.
- 4.8 Open and fair methods for the faculty to provide evaluation and comments on the program, training, staff development, etc., need to be provided.

5. Student Services

The online/distance service provider has the resources and services necessary to help students succeed in a distance learning environment.

- 5.1 The online/distance service provider offers guidelines to help ensure that potential students have the appropriate background, skills, technological expertise and the appropriate technology to reasonably expect student success.
- 5.2 An adequate helpdesk and tutorial services are available.

- 5.3 Communicates with the student and/or parents, as well as the student's regular school if applicable, the expectations, technologies, support services, and time estimates needed for course completion.
- 5.4 Assists the student in understanding independent learning, collaborative experiences, as well as the nature and potential challenges of learning in a technology-based online/distant environment.
- 5.5 Information is readily available to students, often through their local school, on what courses are available, how to enroll in courses, etc., and that all information is sufficient, fair, and accurate.
- 5.6 Makes reasonable attempts to address the needs and learning styles of individual students.
- 5.7 All policies, procedures, and costs that relate to distance students are available online and/or in print and are clearly explained.
- 5.8 Students have a method to evaluate the delivery and structure of the courses and the organization provides an adequate means to resolve student complaints.
- 5.9 A student manual or school catalog for all courses and services is provided. This includes accurate and clearly stated information about admissions, progression, completion criteria, dismissal, grievance procedures, and any applicable licensing requirements.
- 5.10 Appropriate orientation is provided to the student concerning the educational program and any technologies needed.
- 5.11 A complete syllabus for each course delineates course specific information needed by students.

6. Evaluation and Assessment

The online/distance learning service provider establishes, implements, and monitors a continuous process of improvement that focuses on student learning and achievement.

- 6.1 The online/distance learning service provider ensures that course instructors provide performance measures for student learning that yield information that is reliable, valid, and bias free.
- 6.2 Student assessment data is used for making decisions for continuous improvement of teaching and learning processes.
- 6.3 Systematic analysis is conducted of instructional and organizational effectiveness and this information is used to improve provided services.

- 6.4 Procedures and policies are in place for establishing student identity, assuring security of test instruments, administering the examinations, and providing secure and prompt evaluation of student work.
- 6.5 Personal information is protected while providing appropriate dissemination of evaluation results.
- 6.6 Overall program/course effectiveness is determined by such measures as:
- The extent to which student learning matches intended outcomes.
 - Student retention/completion rates, including variations over time.
 - Student, parent, and faculty satisfaction, as measured by regular surveys/evaluations and by formal and informal review processes.
 - Cost effectiveness of the program to its students, as compared to campus-based alternatives.
 - Equivalent relationships and evaluation results between distance education students and on-site students.