**Office of the Provost, Mercer University**

**Policy for Minimum Requirements for University Distance Learning Instruction**
**(approved December 14, 2020 by the University Distance Learning Committee)**

This policy intends to set a broad university expectation for the minimum instructional requirements for all University distance learning courses. Some schools and colleges may have different expectations and policies that exceed these minimum requirements; in these cases, faculty members must adhere first to requirements of their academic unit and may also complete the university training as desired or if directed by their deans.

**Required Faculty Training to Teach Distance Learning Courses (fully online and blended)**

Faculty members, both full-time and adjunct, who are teaching in a school with already-established training for teaching distance learning courses must complete their academic unit's training as required. Each academic unit with already-established training can determine if their training program is sufficient and a suitable substitute for the baseline university training offered by the Center for Teaching & Learning, thereby exempting their faculty from the university training.

Faculty members, both full-time and adjunct, who are teaching in a college or school that does not have required training already in place must complete the University Distance Learning Introductory training course offered by the Center for Teaching & Learning and then annually complete the University Distance Learning Refresher training. This refresher training must be completed annually to maintain certification to teach distance learning courses at Mercer and successful completion must be documented annually in each faculty member's Professional Development Plan in Activity Insight. The University Distance Learning Training courses will be provided in Canvas and successful completion will be documented by a letter from the Center for Teaching & Learning copied to the faculty member and the appropriate dean or associate dean.

**Required Technology**

Faculty members must use Canvas to host/deliver all instructional materials, discussions, assessments, and files, and other peripheral tools and applications that support teaching and learning.

Faculty members must use Zoom for all synchronous sessions, including virtual office hours. Blended on-campus courses are considered F2F sessions.

Faculty members must use their University-issued email address and/or Canvas inbox for all course correspondence.

No other applications may be used in place of either Canvas or Zoom, although alternate supplemental technology may be used, such as a publisher learning platform.

**Required Submission of Synchronous or Classroom-Required Dates to Registrar**

Required synchronous sessions and on-campus, classroom required dates must be submitted to the Registrar by departments and schools when the upcoming semester course schedule is submitted. For example, if a course requires a Thursday night synchronous web conference, this information must be

included when the course schedule is sent to the Registrar. Required synchronous sessions or blended classroom on-campus sessions are not to be scheduled after the course begins and thus must follow University scheduling guidelines.

Dates and times for optional synchronous sessions may not need to be reported to the registrar in advance and may be scheduled after the course begins but the sessions do need to be recorded for students who cannot attend. If a grade is being offered for optional synchronous session activity then alternate direct instructional activities must be offered for students who cannot attend.

**Required Attendance Reporting**

**Roll Reconciliation**
Faculty are required to report attendance in distance learning courses for at least the first three weeks of class and within the first week of class, using the attendance function on MyMercer. This is also called Roll Reconciliation, since you will identify students who have both attended or not attended.

Students are considered 'Present' in a distance learning course if they participate in academically related activities. (See also guidance on direct instructional time in the Mercer University Credit Hour Policy.)

**How to Define Attendance**
While schools and colleges may specify requirements for what defines attendance in distance learning courses, it is important to know the range of activities that are and are not considered attendance.

**What Is Considered Attendance?**
To be counted as present, a student must have participated in class or have otherwise engaged in an academically-related activity. Minimum examples of acceptable evidence of academic attendance and attendance at an academically related activity in a distance education program include:
- attendance at a synchronous web conference class session with the instructor present
- student submission of an academic assignment
- student submission of an quiz or exam
- documented student participation in an interactive tutorial or computer-assisted instruction
- a posting by the student showing the student's participation in an online study group that is assigned by the institution
- a posting by the student in a discussion forum showing the student's participation in an online discussion about academic matters
- documentation showing that the student and a faculty member corresponded about the academic subject studied in the course.

Expected attendance criteria must be documented in the course syllabus. See the Direct Instruction activities contained in the Mercer Credit Hour Policy and listed below.

**What is Not Considered Attendance?**
Academically related activities do not include activities where a student may be present but not academically engaged, such as:
- living in institutional housing, participating in the school's meal plan,
- logging into an online class without active participation,
- participating in academic counseling or advisement.

In a distance education context, documenting that a student has logged in to an online class is not sufficient, by itself, to demonstrate academic attendance by the student. *Canvas analytics may not be used to document attendance.*

**Roll Reconciliation Process**
For roll reconciliation purposes, attendance/participation should be recorded:
- through MyMercer (my.mercer.edu) for ALL courses.
- for at least the first three weeks of class
  - Best practice is to post attendance throughout the entire term.

**Courses With a Scheduled Meeting Time**
If your course meets at a posted weekly time, please post attendance by the end of each calendar week.

**Courses Without a Scheduled Meeting Time**
Attendance for courses without a regularly-scheduled meeting time (asynchronous online, independent study, internships, student teaching, practicum, etc.) will be recorded once a week on Wednesdays for the week.

**Required Office Hours**

Office hours must follow a faculty member's college or school's policy, meaning that the same number of hours are held for both traditional face-to-face courses and distance learning courses, with flexibility in scheduling to accommodate students who can only connect in the evening. For distance learning courses, office hours may be held virtually using Zoom, which is the only university approved and supported virtual meeting space, or via University email or phone. Blended course faculty office hours may be adjusted to offset on-campus meeting times.

**Required Faculty Course Presence**

Faculty members must actively engage with students via Canvas regularly each week at a frequency consistent with the number of required contact hours of the course. Selected examples of engagement include responding to discussion items, providing feedback on assignments, and hosting synchronous class sessions or review sessions. Faculty office hours do not count as part of this in-course engagement. [*Engagement time will need adjustment for greater or lesser credit hour courses*] More examples of course presence activities are provided in the Center for Teaching & Learning's Distance Learning Training.

**Required Email Response Time**

Response time to student emails must be within the next business day after an email is received by a faculty member. This policy is not in effect during University-sanctioned holidays.

**Required Course Start Date**

Courses should be published at least 1 week before the start date, with a minimum expectation of the publishing the complete course syllabus even if no other content is made available.

The course start date and time should be the first day of the academic session at 8:00 am. Although the course syllabus should have been published at least one week earlier, the Canvas course content should be published and active by this time, to include at a minimum the first week's content and any expected assignments.

1. **Required Distance Learning Course Syllabi Content (in addition to regularly-required content):**
- Any content required specifically by the academic unit
- Contact information including University-issued email address and university phone number
- Office hours and availability for virtual meetings using Zoom or other communication methods like email or phone on mutually agreed days and times
- Catalog course description, prerequisites, and any further description by the instructor
- Explanation of technology being used – text from: (http://it.mercer.edu/student/hardware_software/computer_recommendations.htm)
- Course calendar including:
    - course end date and time (should be last day of academic session with instructor discretion as to the ending time)
    - dates and times of any/all synchronous or classroom sessions
    - assignment due dates and times (specific to time due)
    - assessment dates (tests)
- Proctoring statement, if proctoring is being used
- Definition of attendance (what counts that can be recorded as attendance per registrar requirements. See "How to Define Attendance" above). Please include a statement in your syllabus similar to the excerpt below:

    "Students are required by federal law to demonstrate attendance in classes—including online classes—in order to receive federal financial aid. In online classes, students must demonstrate attendance through the completion of an academic activity. In this class, you must demonstrate attendance by submitting at least one graded component within each week to be considered "present." Logging in to the course does not equate to attendance. If you do not complete this activity during that window of time, you may be reported as not attending this class, and any financial aid award may be negatively affected."

- Carnegie unit/hour and minute breakdown of activities:  750 minutes of direct instruction per credit hour / 1500 minutes of homework or out of class student work per credit hour. The course syllabus must explicitly communicate the distribution of time of direct instruction, like this example:

    **Example Carnegie direct instruction allotment for a sixteen-week, 3 credit hour course, total 2250 minutes:**
    - 50 minutes synchronous web conference once weekly x 15 weeks = 750 minutes
    - 45 minutes per week on course simulation activities x 15 weeks = 675 minutes
    - 15 minutes per week on threaded course discussion x 15 weeks = 225 minutes
    - 30 minutes per week on live, timed reading quizzes = 450 minutes
    - 10 minutes per week listening to recorded instructor podcast = 150 minutes

    **Example Carnegie direct instruction allotment for an eight-week, 3 credit hour course, total 2250 minutes:**
    - 90 minute optional synchronous web conference x 6 = 540 minutes

o   Weekly discussions requiring at least 600 words = 480 minutes
o   Group simulations activities per week = 480 minutes
o   60 minutes per week on live, timed quizzes = 480 minutes
o   Weekly student presentations via Zoom conference = 240 minutes

**Direct Instruction Activities**

Other activities that count for direct instruction per the [University credit hour policy](#) typically represent at a minimum: (1) student content creation or (2) interaction with students and/or the instructor about the academic subject matter. These activities include:

1. In-class instruction
2. In-class tests/quizzes
3. In-class student presentations
4. Online lectures/instruction (synchronous or asynchronous)
5. Online content modules
6. Virtual synchronous class meetings
7. Videoconference meetings
8. Video conference presentations
9. Online tests/quizzes
10. Discussion boards
11. Virtual labs
12. Virtual or non-virtual field trips
13. Virtual or non-virtual service learning
14. Group and/or team-based activities
15. Audio lectures (including podcasts) accompanied by a low-stakes assessment

**Note:** The required out-of-class time of 1,500 minutes per credit hour is not depicted above by an example budget, but must be met by students completing homework, studying, reading, or other out-of-class activities. A three-credit hour course must offer students at least 4,500 minutes of out-of-class work, or 5 hours per week in 15 weeks of a 16-week semester (the last week being finals) or 10 hours in an 8-week semester (the last week being finals).

**Required Canvas Usage**

- Faculty members must use their college and school's template or, if there is not one in place, the University's course template.
- Canvas content must be organized on a weekly, phase/segment, or topical basis using organizational tools within Canvas.
- Assignments from students should be accepted only inside the Canvas course; emailed assignments are not acceptable. Faculty written feedback must be provided only within Canvas, preferably through Speedgrader.
- Course announcements must use the Announcement feature in Canvas rather than by broadcasting to a class email listserv.
- Faculty members must use the Canvas gradebook to report grades during the semester to students. The Canvas gradebook is the unofficial record, while official grades are reported in MyMercer/CampusNexus.

- Faculty members should post an announcement to inform students the course is published by the first day of one week before the semester begins.

*Approved by the University Distance Learning Committee January 22, 2020*
*Approved by the Undergraduate Council February 6, 2020*
*Approved by the Graduate Council February 13, 2020*
*Revisions approved by the University Distance Learning Committee December 14, 2020*