

Approval of Distance Education, including Off-Campus Courses and Programs

Distance Education is any formal instruction that is not conducted on the home campus. This can include a wide range of modalities, from off-campus face-to-face to fully online courses and programs. Distance Education at all public institutions of higher education in Texas is designed to provide residents across the state with access to courses and programs that meet their needs. These policies are intended to ensure distance education course and program quality as well as to prevent unnecessary duplication of these courses and programs. Authority for these policies is provided by Texas Education Code §61.051(j), which grants the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board authority to approve courses for credit and distance education programs.

Information related to the approval of distance education and self-supporting courses can be found in Chapter 4, Subchapters P and Q of Board rules.

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I. Institutional Plan for Distance Education

Before institutions offer any distance education courses or programs **for the first time**, regardless of modality, an [Institutional Plan for Distance Education](#) form must be submitted to the Coordinating Board. To clarify, the plan must be submitted by institutions who have never offered distance education, such as newly created institutions. The Commissioner of Higher Education may require institutions to provide supplemental reports on distance education programs and/or courses.

Each Institutional Plan for Distance Education should reflect institutional academic and administrative policies that express commitment to maintain the quality of distance education courses and programs and should conform to Coordinating Board guidelines, including the [Principles of Good Practice](#), as well as criteria set out by the [Southern Association of Colleges and Schools](#). These criteria shall include provisions relating to:

- Institutional Issues;
- Educational Programs;
- Faculty;
- Student Support Services; and
- Distance Education Facilities and Support

Board rules cover standards and criteria for [distance education programs](#), [courses](#) and [faculty](#). Each program and/or course must comply with the following:

- Be within the role and mission of the offering institution, and be on the inventory of approved programs/courses;
- Any offered degree or certificate program shall comply with the standards and criteria of any specialized accrediting agency;
- Courses shall meet the quality standards applicable to on-campus courses;
- Programs shall be approved by the institution's governing board or the governing board's designee;
- Doctoral or first-professional degree programs may not be offered via distance education unless specifically approved by the Coordinating Board;
- The instructor of record has the responsibility for the delivery of instruction and for evaluation of student progress; and,
- Institutions shall report, in accordance with Board policy and procedures, all distance education courses and programs.

Prior board approval may be required before institutions may offer programs in certain subject area disciplines.

Additional criteria and standards associated with faculty teaching distance education are:

- Faculty shall be selected and evaluated using the same standards and procedures used for on-campus faculty;
- Institutions shall provide training and support to those faculty teaching distance education courses; and,
- The supervision and monitoring processes shall be the same as those for on-campus faculty.

II. Off-Campus Educational Units

An Off-Campus Educational Unit is defined by Board rules as: A subdivision under the management and control of an existing public university, university system, health-related institution or a combination of these units, (parent institution), in a geographic setting separate from the parent institution(s). The Coordinating Board classifies off-campus education units into four broad categories:

1. Higher education teaching site -- an off-campus teaching location that promotes access in an area not served by other public universities. Teaching sites offer a very limited array of courses and/or programs and do not entail a permanent commitment for continued service. Teaching sites may not own facilities, nor are they eligible for state support to acquire or build facilities. Teaching sites do not require Board approval or recognition.
2. Recognized higher education teaching sites -- a higher education teaching site that is recognized by the Coordinating Board and is included in the Coordinating Board's inventory of statewide teaching sites. For recognition, an institution should send an email to Dr. Andrew Lofters (andrew.lofters@theccb.state.tx.us) with the name of the site, the complete address and phone number, and URL for the higher education teaching site website.

3. Higher education centers -- higher education centers must be established by the Texas Legislature or approved by the Coordinating Board for the specific purpose of offering academic credit courses and programs from the parent institution(s). Higher education centers are of a larger size and offer a broader array of courses and programs than higher education teaching sites. They have minimal administration and locally provided facilities.

There are three types of higher education centers:

- a. Multi-Institution Teaching Center (MITC) -- a higher education center administered under a formal agreement between two or more public higher education institutions. It may also involve one or more private institutions.
 - b. University System Center -- a higher education center administered by a university system.
 - c. Single Institution Center -- a higher education center administered by an individual institution.
4. Branch and Special Purpose Campuses -- special types of off-campus education units. The term "campus" in relation to off-campus educational units of public senior colleges, universities and health-related institutions refers to one of the following units:
 - a. Branch Campus -- a major, secondary location of an institution offering multiple programs, usually with its own administrative structure and usually headed by a Dean.
 - b. Special Purpose Campus -- a major, secondary location of an
 - c. institution offering programs related to specific and limited field(s) of study, usually with its own administrative structure and usually headed by a Dean.
 - d. Regional Academic Health Centers, which are used to provide undergraduate clinical education, graduate education, including residency training programs, or other levels of medical education in specifically identified counties, are considered special purpose campuses.

The various off-campus education units exist as a means to extend education to students not located within reasonable driving distance of existing institutions and/or specific degree programs.

III. Off-Campus Upper-Division and Graduate Courses and Programs (excluding doctoral and special professional programs)

Universities and health-related institutions shall notify all area institutions, Higher Education Centers, and the Coordinating Board of their plans to offer distance education courses and programs.

*Notification procedures for off-campus programs
(excluding doctoral and special professional degrees)*

An institution proposing a distance education degree program must have approval to offer the program.

Baccalaureate degree completion programs in which over half of the courses are offered via distance education are, for the purposes of notification, considered a distance education program. Thus, when determining whether or not a baccalaureate degree completion is a distance education program, institutions should examine the percentage of coursework offered via distance education that is a part of the completion program, including any core curriculum courses, electives, and other required courses. These programs should follow notification procedures below.

For programs that are to be delivered electronically-to-individuals (i.e., online), notification should take the form of an email to Dr. Andrew Lofters (andrew.lofters@theccb.state.tx.us) and should include a pdf of the signed [Certification Form for Electronically Delivered and Off-Campus Education Programs](#). The notification email should include program level and name, CIP code, and implementation date.

For programs that are to be delivered electronically-to-groups or off-campus face-to-face, notification should take the form of an email to Dr. Andrew Lofters (andrew.lofters@theccb.state.tx.us) and should include a pdf of the signed [Certification Form for Electronically Delivered and Off-Campus Education Programs](#). In addition to Coordinating Board notification, institutions should also notify all institutions of higher education, including Higher Education Centers, within a 50-mile radius of the proposed delivery site via email with a copy to Dr. Andrew Lofters (andrew.lofters@theccb.state.tx.us). Notification should take place at least 60 days prior to the proposed program implementation. Once notified, institutions shall have 30 days to file an objection. The objection should be made via email to the offering institution, with copies to the Coordinating Board staff previously mentioned. Institutions are encouraged to make every effort to resolve disputes on their own. If such a resolution isn't possible, the Commissioner has the authority to resolve disputes between institutions regarding the offering of courses and programs and has the authority to approve or disapprove such courses or programs. The Commissioner will then report to area institutions on approvals and disapprovals of disputed courses and programs. The Board may hear appeals to approvals and disapprovals made by the Commissioner. Approval for the program is considered automatic if no objections are made.

*****Once the program is approved, it will not be necessary to provide notification when courses which are part of that program are to be offered.**

*Notification procedures for off-campus courses
not part of approved distance education degree program*

Institutions are not required to provide notification for courses that are a part of approved distance education degree programs. Notification is also not required for electronic-to-individual (i.e., online) courses.

For electronic-to-group or off-campus face-to-face and self-supporting courses not part of approved distance education degree programs, the parent institution shall notify all institutions of higher education and Higher Education Centers within a 50-mile radius of the proposed

delivery site by email at least 60 days prior to the proposed first class day. A copy of the notification should be emailed to Dr. Andrew Lofters (andrew.lofters@theccb.state.tx.us). Once notified, institutions shall have 30 days to file an objection. The objection should be made via email to the offering institution, with copies to the Coordinating Board staff previously mentioned. Institutions are encouraged to make every effort to resolve disputes on their own. If such a resolution isn't possible, the Commissioner has the authority to resolve disputes between institutions regarding the offering of courses and programs and has the authority to approve or disapprove such courses or programs. The Commissioner will then report to area institutions on approvals and disapprovals of disputed courses and programs. The Board may hear appeals to approvals and disapprovals made by the Commissioner.

IV. Off-Campus Lower-Division Courses and Programs And Higher Education Regional Councils

The [Higher Education Regional Councils](#) have oversight over many, but not all, off-campus lower-division courses and programs offered by community colleges, universities, health-related institutions, public technical colleges, and Lamar State Colleges in Texas.

There are ten Higher Education Regional Councils in Texas that consist of the universities, community colleges, technical colleges, and Lamar State Colleges within that region. These Regional Councils correspond to the ten Uniform State Service Regions. The purpose of the Higher Education Regional Councils is to advise the Commissioner on appropriate policies and procedures for the effective state-level administration of off-campus lower-division instruction. The Regional Councils are also expected to help facilitate inter-institutional cooperation in the conduct of off-campus instruction and to encourage excellence in the conduct of off-campus lower-division instruction.

The membership of each Regional Council is comprised of presidents or designated representatives of each participating public and independent institution within the region. A Council Chair is elected by the members. The term of service for the Council Chair is also determined by the members. Regional Councils are expected to meet annually each spring to perform their designated duties. Any business that arises during other times of the year may be conducted electronically at the discretion of the Council Chair. It is the responsibility of the Chair to inform members of the region of the date, time, and location of the spring council meeting.

The responsibilities of the Regional Councils include:

- Reviewing the proposed off-campus lower-division course and program offerings of each member public institution as presented in their Off-Campus Instruction Plans. Regional Councils may review additional courses not originally included in the Off-Campus Instruction Plan proposed by institutions after the regular annual meeting through a format of the Chair's choosing which can include electronic and/or telephonic deliberations.
- Assuring that each institution in the region receives notification of all off-campus lower-division courses and programs proposed to be offered in the Region by any other public institution, and to provide each public institution in the Region full opportunity to review and comment on the plans of other public institutions, excluding dual credit courses.

- Resolving any disputes associated with the proposed off-campus lower-division course offerings, excluding dual credit. If a resolution cannot be reached, or an institution wishes to appeal the Regional Council's resolution, the Commissioner has the authority to resolve disputes between institutions regarding the offering of courses and has the authority to approve or disapprove such courses as well as the approval or disapproval of Off-Campus Instruction Plans. The Commissioner will then report to area institutions on approvals and disapprovals of disputed courses and programs. The Board may hear appeals to approvals and disapprovals made by the Commissioner.
- Studying cooperatively the various methods of providing lower-division off-campus instruction, and promoting the use of those methods which support quality and promise the most effective and efficient use of state resources.

Regional Councils are also expected to provide the Coordinating Board with the following documentation within fourteen days following each annual meeting:

- Procedures and guidelines for reviewing Off-Campus Instruction Plans;
- Minutes from the annual meeting;
- The member public institutions' Off-Campus Instruction Plans;
- The member public institutions' off-campus dual credit offerings; and
- Contact information for the Council Chair, including term of service, and a roster of Council members.

All off-campus lower-division courses and programs offered by community colleges, universities, health-related institutions, public technical colleges, and Lamar State Colleges shall be reviewed by the Higher Education Regional Council serving each site proposed to receive instruction, **except for the following courses:**

- Off-campus lower-division courses and programs offered by a community college within its service area;
- Off-campus lower-division dual credit courses offered by a university, health-related institution, public technical college, and/or Lamar State College that have been requested by a school district and/or high school; and
- Off-campus (or out of service district) lower division clinical courses which meet all of the following conditions:
 - The student(s) enrolled in the clinical course is(are) already employed by the clinical facility where the course is being taken.
 - The clinical facility provides the institution of higher education offering the course with written verification that there will be no reduction in the number of clinical opportunities available for use by area institutions.
 - The institution of higher education offering the course shall notify the appropriate Regional Council(s) and provide the Regional Council(s) with the written verification from the clinical facility.

An Off-Campus Instruction Plan must be submitted to the Regional Council by each public institution of higher education that is planning to offer off-campus lower-division courses, clinicals, and/or programs in that region. The Plan should include a listing of all off-campus lower-division course offerings, lower-division programs, and clinical sites as well as the following information:

- The semester, course number, name, day, meeting time, and location of delivery for each off-campus lower-division face-to-face or electronic-to-group course;
- The facility name and addresses for clinical sites; and
- The name and location of delivery for off-campus lower-division face-to-face or electronic-to-group programs.

NOTE: Electronic-to-individual courses (whether they be delivered via the internet or iTV) should not be included on the Off-Campus Instruction Plan.

In addition to submitting its Off-Campus Instruction Plan to the Regional Council in which an institution resides, public institutions are also responsible for notifying the chair of each Regional Council in which they are planning to offer off-campus lower-division courses and programs of those proposed offerings, even if they are not subject to Regional Council review. This notification should be made prior to the Regional Council's annual meeting. For those courses and programs that are subject to Regional Council review, the Council shall return a recommendation for approval or disapproval to the originating institution as well as provide both the institution's request and the Regional Council's recommendation to the Coordinating Board.

Questions regarding Regional Councils may be directed to Dr. Andrew B. Lofters, (andrew.lofters@theccb.state.tx.us).

V. Online Distance Education/Hybrid and Blended Programs and Courses

Online distance education in the state of Texas is also known as "electronic to individuals" and is divided into two categories: fully online and hybrid/blended. 85%-100% of the content/curriculum of a fully online course or program is delivered online; mandatory face-to-face sessions may total no more than 15% of the instruction time. A course or program with 50-85% of the content/curriculum delivered online is considered hybrid or blended.

New online and hybrid/blended programs at all public institutions of higher education require governing board approval and prior CB notification to Dr. Andrew B. Lofters, (andrew.lofters@theccb.state.tx.us).

VI. Distance Education and Off-Campus Doctoral and Special Professional Programs

All doctoral and special professional programs delivered at a distance require prior Coordinating Board approval. A doctoral or special professional program is considered to be offered through distance education and/or off-campus delivery when over half of the semester credit hours, excluding dissertation and research, may be completed without the student being in residence on campus.

The Coordinating Board expects all doctoral and special professional programs delivered through distance education to meet the following standards:

- The program is of high quality;
- It is delivered in a way that preserves this high quality;
- The program meets a well-documented state need; and
- The program can be delivered at a reasonable cost.

An institution proposing a doctoral or special professional program for distance delivery must have approval to offer the program. (If an institution does not have approval, [a Distance Education Doctoral Degree Proposal form](#) must be submitted.) For institutions wishing to deliver an existing on-campus doctoral or special professional program as a distance education program, the on-campus program must be in good standing with all appropriate review and accreditation organizations. Additionally, the combined enrollments of an on-campus doctoral program and the distance delivery doctoral program must be sufficient to permit the program's successful continuation. If a decision is made to phase out either program, arrangements must be made to allow students to complete the program in the most expedient and appropriate manner.

New distance education doctoral or special professional proposals must be submitted to the Coordinating Board using the [Distance Education Doctoral Degree Proposal form](#) and must be submitted through the appropriate institutional and system administrative channels. If the proposed program is to be offered electronically-to-groups or off-campus face-to-face, institutions must notify all institutions of higher education within a 50-mile radius of the proposed delivery site at the time the proposal is submitted to the Coordinating Board. A copy of the notification should be emailed to Dr. Andrew B. Lofters (andrew.lofters@theccb.state.tx.us). Once notified, institutions shall have 30 days to file an objection. The objection should be made via email to the offering institution, with copies to the Coordinating Board staff previously mentioned.

Once submitted the following steps occur:

- Coordinating Board staff will review the proposal and, if appropriate, forward to the Learning Technology Advisory Committee for review;
- The Learning Technology Advisory Committee shall review the proposal and make recommendations; and

- Based upon those recommendations the Commissioner or his designee shall decide if the proposal will be approved.

Institutions that have received permission to offer off-campus electronic-to-groups or face-to-face doctoral programs may add additional delivery sites by submitting the [Additional Delivery Site Approval form](#) through appropriate institutional and system administrative channels. At that time all institutions of higher education within a 50-mile radius of the proposed delivery site must also be notified of the proposal. A copy of the notification should be emailed to Dr. Andrew B. Lofters (andrew.lofters@theccb.state.tx.us). Once notified, institutions shall have 30 days to file an objection. The objection should be made via email to the offering institution, with copies to the Coordinating Board staff previously mentioned. The decision to approve additional delivery sites may be made by the Commissioner or his designee after review by Coordinating Board staff.

Institutions that have previously approved distance education doctoral and special professional degree programs may request permission to offer those programs via other distance education delivery modes. In order to do so, an institution should submit a new [Distance Doctoral Submission form](#) through appropriate institutional and system administrative channels. If the change would result in new off-campus face-to-face or electronic-to-groups delivery sites, all institutions of higher education within a 50-mile radius of the proposed delivery sites must also be notified of the proposal. The decision to approve additional delivery modalities may be made by the Commissioner or his designee after review by Coordinating Board staff and the Learning Technology Advisory Committee.

A limited number of doctoral and special professional courses may be delivered without distance doctoral program approval. As with other off-campus courses, these also require notification of area institutions. Additionally, institutions must provide notification to the Coordinating Board when **more than four courses are offered via distance education** in a single degree program. This notification ensures that institutions do not offer a doctoral or special professional program inadvertently via a distance education modality.

NOTE: New doctoral programs offered for the first time at an institution (i.e. have not existed either on-campus or off) must first gain approval from the THECB using the [Doctoral Program Application Form](#) and [Guidelines for Institutions Submitting New Proposals for New Doctoral Programs](#).

VII. Self-Supporting Programs

Self-supporting degree programs are academic programs (formerly defined as extension programs) whose semester credit hours are not submitted for formula funding. They must adhere to the same standards as any formula-funded distance education program. Institutions offering self-supporting programs, whether on campus or off-campus face-to-face, *must* provide area notification with copy to Dr. Andrew B. Lofters (andrew.lofters@theccb.state.tx.us). Each year an institutional designee must also file a CBM00X Report with the THECB Educational Data Center regarding self-supported programs offered by the institution.