

REGULAR AND EFFECTIVE CONTACT POLICY

In fully online and hybrid courses, regular and effective contact from the instructor ensures that students receive the benefit of consistent instructor presence as a provider of course content and instructional information, and as a facilitator of student learning. In addition, regular and substantive interaction between the instructor and students affects retention, success, student authentication, financial aid, and college accreditation. Therefore it must be demonstrable and documented, and a college-wide policy that provides guidelines must be in place. This document provides that policy and helps guide instructors in maintaining this crucial element in their courses.

DEFINITIONS

“Distance education” (DE) refers to any course for which some or all of the specified contact hours are not regularly scheduled, that uses one or more technologies to provide instruction to students, and in which there is regular and substantive interaction between the instructor and students.

“Fully online courses” are DE courses in which none of the contact hours are regularly scheduled.

“Hybrid courses” are DE courses in which some but not all of the contact hours are regularly scheduled.

INSTRUCTOR INITIATED CONTACT

State guidelines emphasize that instructors are responsible for initiating contact with students. This makes sense, of course, as students could easily fall through the cracks because they are unwilling, unsure, or confused about contacting the instructor. At the very least instructors in fully online and hybrid courses should regularly contact students to make sure they are involved in the following:

- Accessing course content.
- Comprehending course content.
- Regularly participating in the course activities.

TYPES OF INTERACTION

There are many different types of instructor-initiated interaction that could occur in online and hybrid courses. The types of interaction that an instructor chooses will depend on many things, including but not limited to the purpose of the interaction, the target recipient(s), established norms or policies in the course, and the need for reasonable caution. For example, if an instructor wishes to use bulk text messaging to remind students of assignments, employing applications such as Remind.com will facilitate such a task without revealing the instructor’s private cell phone number. However, instructors may use any combination of the following examples of instructor-student interaction that seems appropriate for the needs of the course:

- Email
- Private messaging system within the learning management system
- Discussion board posting
- Regular announcement through the learning management system announcement tool
- Live online chat (CCCConfer, Moodle Chat, Skype, etc.)
- Timely feedback on submitted work
- Telephone
- Text message (SMS)
- Instructor-prepared lectures or lecture material
- Instructor-assigned student work
- Feedback on student work

FREQUENCY OF INTERACTION

The amount of instructor contact hours, per-week, in a distance education course should be comparable to that in an equivalent face-to-face section. However, due to the nature of distance education, the contact will be distributed in a manner that ensures regular contact throughout the week and for the duration of the term. As indicated in KCCD Board Policy, at a minimum, instructors should interact with students twice each week.

ESTABLISHING EXPECTATIONS

Instructors should respond to student questions, emails, and other communication initiated by the student within 48 hours. Ideally, the division should work with instructors to establish an overarching policy for instructor contact with students, based on guidelines in this document. Once established, these policies will be explained in the course syllabus and/or other course documents as deemed appropriate. Also, this document shall include information on how the students can contact the instructor, with at least two separate methods for contacting the instructor clearly explained.

UNEXPECTED INSTRUCTOR ABSENCE

If the instructor will be out of contact for any time not specified in the course documents, the instructor will notify students of the loss of contact and when they can expect regular contact with the instructor to resume. If the instructor's absence will exceed three instructional days (excluding weekend and holidays), then the instructor will submit an absence report so that a substitute can be assigned.

GUIDING REGULATIONS

The California Community College Distance Education Guidelines states the following:

55204. Instructor Contact.

In addition to the requirements of section 55002 and any locally established requirements applicable to all courses, district governing boards shall ensure that:

(a) Any portion of a course conducted through distance education includes regular effective contact between instructor and students, through group or individual meetings, orientation and review sessions, supplemental seminar or study sessions, field trips, library workshops, telephone contact, correspondence, voice mail, e-mail, or other activities. Regular effective contact is an academic and professional matter

pursuant to sections 53200 et seq.

(b) Any portion of a course provided through distance education is conducted consistent with guidelines issued by the Chancellor pursuant to section 409 of the Procedures and Standing Orders of the Board of Governors.

NOTE: Authority cited: Sections 66700 and 70901, Education Code. Reference: Sections 70901 and 70902, Education Code.

Guideline for Section 55204

This section defines what contact must be maintained between instructor and student. It is virtually identical to section 55211 which it replaces, except that language has been added to clarify that rules related to conduct of distance education and effective instructor contact apply to any portion of a course conducted through distance education.

Subdivision (a) stresses the responsibility of the instructor in a DE course to initiate regular contact with enrolled students to verify their participation and performance status. The use of the term “regular effective contact” in this context suggests that students should have frequent opportunities to ask questions and receive answers from the instructor of record.

The last published Distance Education Guidelines, March 2004, issued by the Chancellor pursuant to section 409 of the Procedures and Standing Orders of the Board of Governors, as referenced in subdivision (b), establishes the principle that for DE courses there are a number of acceptable interactions between instructor and student, not all of which may require in-person contact. Thus, districts and/or colleges will need to define “effective contact” including how often, and in what manner instructor-student interaction is achieved. It is important to document regular effective contact and how it is achieved. Since regular effective contact was declared an academic and professional matter, this documentation must include demonstration of collegial consultation with the academic senate, for example through its delegation to the local curriculum committee. A natural place for this to occur is during the separate course approval process (see section 55206) as well as during faculty evaluations, student surveys, and program review. Documentation should consist of the inclusion of information in applicable outlines of record on the type and frequency of interaction appropriate to each DE course/section or session. Local policies should establish and monitor minimum standards of regular effective contact.

The Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC), Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), in the “Guide to Evaluating Distance Education and Correspondence Education,” June 2013 edition, states:

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Definition of Distance Education

"Distance education is defined, for the purposes of accreditation review as a formal interaction which uses one or more technologies to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and which supports regular and substantive interaction between the students and instructor, either synchronously or asynchronously..."

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Standard II.A.1.a

Is there a policy that defines "regular and substantive interaction" for DE courses? (34 C.F.R. § 602.3.)

CONCLUSION

By adopting this regular and effective contact policy, Porterville College aims to ensure that students enrolled in distance education classes experience the same quality and amount of support from instructors as those enrolled in face-to-face classes. The only difference is that the types of contact in distance education classes may be significantly more diverse than that of a traditional classroom setting. Ultimately, whether enrolled in online classes or on-ground classes, students remain our focus as we commit to ensuring an excellent educational experience while they engage in coursework at Porterville College.