Office of the Provost, Mercer University

Policy for Minimum Requirements for University Distance Learning Instruction

(Includes both blended and fully online (synchronous/asynchronous) courses.

This policy will be presented to the Distance Learning Committee on January 16, 2020, and then to the Undergraduate and Graduate councils in February and March for adoption as a University policy under the governance of the Provost’s office.

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 (to be built). 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 in Canvas.

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

Scheduled nights for 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 hybrid 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 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.
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)
- Accommodations paragraph (as included currently in all syllabi)
- 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
- Weekly discussions requiring at least 600 words = 480 minutes
- Group simulations activities per week = 480 minutes
- 60 minutes per week on live, timed quizzes = 480 minutes
- Weekly student presentations via Zoom conference = 240 minutes

Other activities that count for direct instruction per the University credit hour policy: https://policies.mercer.edu/www/mu-policies/upload/MU-Credit-Hour-Policy.pdf
1. In-class instruction
2. In-class tests/quizzes
3. In-class student presentations
4. Online lectures/instruction (synchronous or asynchronous)
5. Virtual synchronous class meetings
6. Case studies
7. Group Wiki projects
8. Video presentations
9. Journal/Blog writing
10. Chat rooms
11. Discussion boards
12. Field trips (including virtual)
13. Online tests/quizzes
14. Video conferencing
15. Virtual labs
16. Online content modules
17. Service learning
18. Group or team-based activities
19. Podcasts

**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