



# Distance Learning Faculty Handbook



Academic Year 2024-25

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## **Introduction**

The Distance Learning Faculty Handbook is a supplement to the University Faculty Handbook. It serves as a resource to faculty with information about federal and accreditation requirements for distance learning, University policies and processes that relate to distance education, guidelines for developing and teaching online and blended courses, and information on technology for distance education.

Hyperlinks to pertinent documents and websites are provided throughout the text, and faculty are encouraged to review those. Every attempt has been made to ensure that the materials found within do not duplicate either the University Faculty Handbook or other Supplemental Handbooks. Please refer to those Handbooks for information about general University and College/School Policies and Procedures.

## **Distance Learning at Mercer University**

As a university committed to excellence and innovation, Mercer offers distance learning courses and programs in order to make the University accessible to more students. By offering these programs and courses, the University has been able to extend its role and mission beyond its campus boundaries, educating and empowering students and working professionals to serve their own communities.

## **Defining Distance Learning**

Distance learning is when the majority (50% or more) of the instruction occurs when the student(s) and instructor(s) are not in the same place. Distance learning courses and programs at Mercer are offered in one of two formats: Online or Blended. Online courses and programs are conducted fully online. There are no requirements for face-to-face on-campus experiences, such as classes, meetings, or weekend seminars. Program specific orientations that are one-time and on-campus are allowed.

Blended courses and programs require some face-to-face on-campus experiences, including classes, meetings, and weekend seminars. A program that conducts all of its classes online but requires students to come to campus for anything other than orientation is considered blended.

## **Distance Learning Committee**

The Provost-appointed University Distance Learning Committee is composed of faculty members from all colleges/schools, administrative representatives from the Department of Information Technology, and representatives from administrative departments providing services to distance education students. The Committee meets regularly and, in its advisory capacity, makes recommendations to the Provost. The committee reviews curriculum proposals for distance learning programs as requested by the Undergraduate and Graduate Councils of the University and monitors the effectiveness of technology and technology support, academic and student support services, faculty development and student training opportunities, and communication to distance education students to ensure a quality distance learning experience

comparable to that provided in Mercer's face-to-face courses.

### **Role of Faculty in Distance Education at Mercer**

The faculty and deans assume primary responsibility for and exercise oversight of distance education at Mercer ensuring both the rigor of programs and the quality of instruction. The faculty members of record for distance education courses at Mercer are the same faculty who teach on-campus, and each college/school ensures that those who teach distance courses have knowledge of distance teaching and learning. Faculty members and deans are expected to work together continuously to evaluate and improve all distance learning courses and programs within their respective college/school by reviewing results of online course evaluation surveys and program outcome assessment results. Like all academic programs, results of the assessments and evaluations are documented in the University's assessment record in Compliance Assist.

### **Distance Learning Website**

The University maintains a [Distance Learning Website](#) with information for prospective and current students about current online and blended programs, admissions, registration, student services, and technology support. The site also serves as a source for information about Mercer's compliance with federal regulations that relate to state authorization (discussed in detail below). Faculty are encouraged to familiarize themselves with the content and resources available on the website.

## **Accreditation Requirements and Federal Regulations for Distance Education**

Mercer University not only adheres to the policies for distance education course and programs set forth by its accrediting agency, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), it also follows other federal regulations that pertain to distance education. Below you will find the SACSCOC Policy Statements and Standards for distance education. Many of the policy statements are tied to federal regulations, and where appropriate these regulations have been noted. At the end of this section there is information about federal regulations regarding state authorization and consumer protection.

### **SACSCOC Distance and Correspondence Education Policy**

Mercer is required by SACSCOC to demonstrate that it meets the following policy standards that relate to distance education (a .pdf of the policy document is available [here](#)):

The Core Requirements and Standards of the *Principles of Accreditation* apply to all modes of delivery, including distance and correspondence education. Institutions are responsible for the quality of programs and courses delivered by means of distance education and for ensuring that distance and correspondence education programs and courses offered are complemented by support structures and resources that allow for the total growth and development of students. SACSCOC expects institutions not only to meet the *Principles* as applied to distance learning, but also to comply with all related SACSCOC policies.

Outlined below is the definition for distance and correspondence education and a summary of standards and policy statements related to distance and correspondence education.

**Definition of Distance Education.** For the purposes of the SACSCOC's accreditation review, distance education is a formal educational process in which the majority of the instruction (interaction between students and instructors and among students) in a course occurs when students and instructors are not in the same place. Instruction may be synchronous or asynchronous. A distance education course may use the internet; one-way and two-way transmissions through open broadcast, closed circuit, cable, microwave, broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite, or wireless communications devices; audio conferencing; or video cassettes, DVD's, and CD-ROMs if used as part of the distance learning course or program.

### Standards and Policy Statements

1. At the time of review by SACSCOC, the institution must demonstrate that the student who registers in a distance or correspondence education course or program is the same student who participates in and completes the course or program and receives the credit by verifying the identity of a student who participates in class or coursework by using, at the option of the institution, methods such as (1) a secure login and pass code, (2) proctored examinations, and (3) new or other technologies and practices that are effective in verifying student identification. (**Note:** This applies to courses in which the majority of instruction occurs when students and instructor are not in the same place.) (See also Standard 10.6 of the *Principles of Accreditation*.)
2. The institution must have a written procedure for protecting the privacy of students enrolled in distance and correspondence education courses or programs. (See also Standard 10.6 of the *Principles of Accreditation* and see [Mercer's Privacy Procedures for Distance Learning below](#)).
3. The institution must have a written procedure ([see procedure below for Notification of Projected Student Charges](#)) distributed at the time of registration or enrollment that notifies students of any projected additional student charges associated with verification of student identity. (**Note:** The publication of fees may also be incorporated into official student documents or institution's web page that list academic/activities fees for students.) (See also Standard 10.6 of the *Principles of Accreditation*.)
4. An institution that offers distance or correspondence education must ensure that it reports accurate headcount enrollment on its annual Institutional Profile submitted to SACSCOC.
5. Institutions must ensure that their distance and correspondence education courses and programs comply with the *Principles of Accreditation*. This applies to all educational programs and services, wherever located or however delivered.

The SACSCOC [Distance Education policy statement](#) also provides *Guidelines in the Application of the Principles of Accreditation to Distance and Correspondence Education* (see [Appendix A](#)). Institutions are encouraged to utilize the Guidelines in implementing and reporting on distance education programs. Faculty are encouraged to review the Guidelines to ensure that distance education programs and courses they teach meet the *Principles of Accreditation*.

## **State Authorization**

Mercer University is required to obtain authorization from state regulatory agencies in order to offer distance degree programs and courses to out-of-state distance learners as well as placements in internships, practica, and clinical rotations for Mercer students outside of Georgia. Both distance education and experiential learning are important components to the University, so Mercer has worked diligently to meet those requirements.

Participation in a national reciprocity agreement is a mechanism by which universities can offer distance programs and courses and for out-of-state students and placement opportunities for Georgia residents. Mercer participates in the [National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements \(NC-SARA\)](#), which allows the University to offer these programs and learning opportunities throughout the nation. Additional Information on our participation in NC-SARA can be found on the [Distance Learning website](#).

## **Complaint Process for Out-of-State Distance Learners**

The University has policies and procedures in place to address and resolve student grievances in a fair and timely manner. Like all Mercer students, distance learners are advised to address grievances following the [Grievance Procedure](#) outlined in the [Student Handbook](#). However, when an issue cannot be resolved internally, distance students residing outside of Georgia may choose to file a complaint with his/her state regulatory body (see State Contact Information below). If a student lives in a state that participates in the [National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements \(NC-SARA\)](#), she/he must file a complaint with Georgias NC-SARA Portal Agency, the [Georgia Nonpublic Postsecondary Education Commission \(GNPEC\)](#), as outlined below.

## **Students Residing in NC-SARA States**

Under the terms of Mercers agreement with NC-SARA, the [Georgia Nonpublic Postsecondary Education Commission \(GNPEC\)](#) is required to investigate and resolve allegations of dishonest or fraudulent activity, including the provision of false or misleading information. Before filing a complaint, a student must have sought internal resolution for the complaint.

## **Other Complaint Processes**

Students may also file a complaint with the University's regional accrediting agency, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC). Information about that process is available [here](#). Military personnel who receive Tuition Assistance (TA) have an additional complaint process available. Students may submit a complaint with the [Postsecondary Education Complaint System](#) when his/her school fails to follow the [Principles of Excellence](#) established by Executive Order on April 27, 2012.

## **Mercer Policies and Processes for Distance Education**

The University has policies and processes in place that apply specifically to distance education and distance learning instruction, including the [Minimum Requirements for Distance Learning Policy](#) and the curriculum procedure of the [Distance Learning Addendum](#). These are applied from the

inception of a program or course to its conclusion, and they have implications for the way distance learning courses are taught and evaluated. The [Distance Learning Addendum](#) must be submitted with any undergraduate or graduate distance learning curriculum proposal to for a new program or a change to a current program. The [Minimum Requirements for University Distance Learning Instruction Policy](#) posted on the Provost's website and also listed below specifies instructional expectations for distance learning faculty. The University [Credit Hour Policy](#) defines the credit hour used by Mercer University in accordance with federal Program Integrity Regulations and requirements of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, and applies equally to distance learning courses and programs as it does to traditional courses. The [Verification of Student Identity procedure](#) describes how Mercer faculty can identify students taking distance learning courses. The [Mercer Privacy Procedure](#) describes safeguards to distance learning student policy, and the [Procedure for Projected Student Charges](#) describes the methods by which students are notified of additional charges triggered by their enrollment in distance learning courses, such as proctoring.

## **Policy for Minimum Requirements for University Distance Learning Instruction Office of the Provost, Mercer University**

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 **Teaching Online** training course offered by the Center for Teaching & Learning and then annually complete the **Teaching Online Refresher** training. This refresher training must be completed every two years 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 Faculty Success. The Teaching Online training courses will be provided in Canvas and successful completion will be documented by a certificate from the Center for Teaching & Learning (as requested) 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 faculty members 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 a 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. Lended 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 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](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
- 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

### **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 Modules 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.

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### ***End of Minimum Requirements for Distance Learning Policy***

## **Mercer Credit Hour Policy**

[Mercer's Credit Hour Policy](#) applies to all delivery formats, whether in a traditional classroom, in a blended setting, or 100% online. The University adheres to the Carnegie unit for contact time: 750 minutes of classroom or direct faculty instruction and a minimum of 1500 minutes of out-of-class student work for each credit awarded (2250 minutes of direct instruction and 4500 minutes of out-of-class work for a 3-credit hour course). Faculty who teach distance education courses are expected to adhere to the policy and are required to delineate in their syllabi the direct instructional activities, as well as any required synchronous activities required outside class session times indicated in the schedule. In addition, each college or school may have expectations for how direct instructional time should be allocated or documented. A template for the allocation of direct instructional time, utilized by the College of Professional Advancement College, is available in [Appendix B](#).

## **Mercer's Procedure for Verifying Student Identity**

The University verifies the identity of students who register and attend an online distance learning class by authentication into university systems using unique identification credentials.

The university's information technology office creates a unique student ID when the student initially enrolls at Mercer University to use in the Single Sign-On access point for the learning management system and the use of proctored exams when applicable. The university also requires students to create a complex password to access all university systems which they have permission to use. This access is granted via Active Directory Federation Services Single Sign-On authenticating against the University's Azure Active Directory instance.

Students must use their university username and password credentials to access the learning management system. All university applications by which students access course or their own personal information require authentication by their unique student ID and password and use Single Sign-On access. The University does not utilize non-SSO managed applications to interact with distance learning students. The University's office of Information Technology creates the student ID and manages the Active Directory Federation Services Single Sign-On authentication process.

By these methods, the university verifies that students registering in distance learning courses and programs are the same students who complete them and receive credit.

## **FERPA and Communication Procedures to Protect Student Privacy**

The privacy of distance learners at Mercer University is protected by the [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act \(FERPA\)](#), which affords students certain rights with respect to their educational records, including the rights to review and amend their records, the right to consent to disclosures, the right to restrict the release of directory information, and the right to file a complaint with the US Department of Education regarding the University's compliance with FERPA. [See Mercer's Privacy Policy for Distance Learning.](#)

In order to protect the privacy of students, faculty must ensure that the modes through which they communicate personally identifiable information or PII (social security number, student ID, address, birthdate) and confidential information (e.g. grades) are secure. Email is a public form of communication. It is not encrypted or secure. If a faculty member chooses to communicate by email information that is personally identifiable or confidential in nature, the email must contain a link to a secure website and reference content posted there. Emails sent through Mercer's Learning Management System, Canvas, cannot contain PII or grade information. Only the Canvas gradebook or the University's student information system, CampusNexus or the student portal, MyMercer, may contain grade information for dissemination. Mercer has specific procedures in place to protect the privacy of distance learning students, described below.

## **Mercer's Procedures for Protecting Distance Learning Student Privacy**

All state and federal laws and regulations and Mercer University policies concerning the privacy of student records shall apply with equal force and effect to distance learning student records. Detailed information about Mercer University's policy on the confidentiality of student records can be found by visiting the [Mercer University Registrar's website](#).

Mercer University's protection of the privacy of students enrolled in distance education courses or programs includes the following methods:

First, access to distance learning courses and live or recorded web meetings is granted only via secure user ID and password to enrolled students, instructors, and other support staff critical to the operation of the distance learning course. This access is granted via Active Directory Federation Services (ADFS) Single Sign-On authentication against the University's Azure Active Directory instance.

Second, session duration in the learning management system is time-limited to protect student privacy. Access is controlled by the university's instance of ADFS. When a student accesses the learning management system on a personal computer using their unique ID and complex password as official credentials, the user is issued a token within the browser through ADFS. After 10 hours, access to the learning management system times out and the student's browser is directed back to the Single Sign On login page, requiring the student to log back in. The university restricted learning management session time from the default vendor-specified time of 48 hours, and less than the standard session time used by many institutions of 24 hours. When a student accesses the learning management system on a University lab computer, the session duration is only 15 minutes and

times out, requiring a new login. University lab computers also have a software program called Deep Freeze installed, which wipes the temporary memory of the computer each night, removing any information that any user added to the machine, including usernames, passwords and any other identifying information.

Third, students can only view their own personal information in the learning management system, including their student ID, email address, grades, and any course-related submissions. Students cannot see or search for the information of other students.

Fourth, when taking online examinations, students can only see their instance of the examination and cannot view any exam-related information of other students. When taking exams through proctored services, students must present university identification as well as personal identification and take and complete the examination in isolation from other students.

Finally, access to help from the University IT Helpdesk for any technical issues involving student account information is only granted after the student provides the last four digits of their SSID and their date-of-birth.

All University web-based applications and sites that collect personally identifiable information from distance learning students are secured, encrypted websites using standard Secure Socket Layer (SSL) certificates.

## **Mercer's Procedures for Notification of Projected Student Charges**

Mercer University has specific procedures in place to ensure distance learning students are notified of projected student charges. The only requirement for additional student charges associated with verification of identity is the use of third-party proctoring services used to administer and monitor exams in some distance learning courses. Some distance education courses require proctored examinations. When and if a program requires a student to pay for proctoring services, the institution is required to inform the student of those costs when enrolling in a course.

All courses scheduled to be taught in an academic year are submitted annually to the registrar on the last weekend of the calendar year. Updates to scheduled courses for the next upcoming semester are submitted to the registrar approximately 90 days prior to the start of the semester. For example, updates to courses scheduled for the Summer of 2021 are due by February 12, 2021.

In the schedule of courses for each semester, distance learning courses are noted with this comment:

"This course may have additional costs that are associated with exams administered by a proctoring service. Students are responsible for those costs. Payments are made directly to the proctoring service at the time of examination, not the University."

The annual schedule of classes is posted to the registrar's website by campus



at <http://registrar.mercer.edu>. Students can navigate from this landing page to the schedule of classes for their campus and program.

## **Mercer's Procedure for Academic Grievances**

Should a faculty member learn of a student who wishes to file an academic grievance, the faculty member should refer the student to the University's [Grievance Policy and Procedure](#) as outlined in the Student Handbook. If the grievance is non-academic in nature, students are also referred to the Grievance policy, and faculty should be aware that some distance education students have a separate complaint process available to them (see Complaint Process for Out-of-State Distance Learners above).

## **Mercer's Policy for Intellectual Property Rights and Distance Education**

The University has a specific policy for Intellectual Property Rights and Distance Education. The General Principles of the policy support the development, production, and dissemination of intellectual property by Mercer faculty, staff and students, affirm the personal ownership of works of intellect by individual creators (with or without collaborators) done privately or as a member(s) of the Mercer community, and allow the University to commission specific work on its own behalf. The policy also outlines intellectual property rights in courses approved for Mercer credit and other distance education projects, exceptions to the policy, moral rights of creators, and the use of the University name and identity. The full policy is available in [Appendix C](#).

## **Guidelines and Resources for Distance Education Courses and Programs**

In this section you will find information on the best practices utilized for teaching distance education courses along with current and best practices for student orientation, academic and student support resources, and technology. More guidelines are provided in the Center for Teaching and Learning's **Teaching Online** course.

### **Student Orientation**

As a part of best practice and to meet the requirements of IPEDS reporting, each college or school at Mercer **must** provide orientation for distance learning students. Many of the current programs offer an on-campus orientation – this is especially true for blended programs that already require some on-campus activities – but as fully online programs grow, the need for a completely virtual orientation will too. A virtual orientation should familiarize a student with the University and its policies and procedures, provide information about the degree program with an overview of courses, and orient students to the online learning environment with strategies for success and access to academic and student support resources. Successful virtual orientations incorporate webinars, videos, and online tools to provide students with a comprehensive view of the institution.

The College of Professional Advancement of Mercer University provides a required fully virtual orientation for distance learning students. This orientation is administered through Canvas and

students are automatically enrolled in the orientation when they register for an online course. Faculty are encouraged to contribute to the development of virtual orientation materials to meet the needs of distance students who enroll in blended or online programs.

Similarly, the Georgia Baptist College of Nursing delivers the GBCN Graduate Program Online Orientation Course. Newly accepted graduate students in various distance learning graduate nursing programs are enrolled into this course before registering for courses, and prior to attending on-campus (or virtual) orientation. This is a self-paced orientation course designed to guide nursing graduate students through both College and University academic policies, enrollment requirements, and technology orientation necessary to prepare for class.

The Stetson-Hatcher School of Business also offers an orientation process for students entering distance learning programs.

### **Academic and Student Support Services**

Distance education students have access to many of the same resources that on-campus students enjoy and are subject to all of the policies and procedures set forth in the University [Student Handbook](#). Various academic and administrative units in the University have worked to establish policies and resources that directly affect and benefit distance learners. These include admissions and financial assistance, academic advising, registration and transcript services, course placement services, library services, bookstore services, academic support services, career planning services, personal counseling services, and disability services. The [Distance Learning Website](#) provides detailed information on the nature and scope of the services available to distance education students.

Faculty members must inform their students of these services and methods of accessing them at the beginning of each course on the course syllabus or in another location within the Canvas course shell. The [disability/accommodation statement](#) must be included on each course syllabus.

### **Technology for Distance Education**

Mercer utilizes technologies that enhance and support learning across all delivery formats, whether in the classroom or online. The University provides not only the most effective and appropriate technological tools but also the training and support for all Mercer students and faculty.

### **Technology and Instructional Design Resources and Support**

At the university level, [Academic Technology Services](#), a division of the university's Information Technology department, provides technology support for all distance learning faculty members. Training tutorials, workshops, and individual instruction on instructional technologies such as Canvas are available for faculty [online](#). Regularly scheduled faculty workshops focused on effective teaching and enhanced learning in online and blended courses are offered at multiple locations, and the staff of Academic Technology Services responds to requests by individual colleges/schools, departments, and faculty members for assistance with particular components of online teaching and learning. Some individual colleges employ instructional designers or

instructional design consultants to provide expertise in online course design and faculty development.

The Center for Teaching and Learning provides ongoing instructional technology help to faculty members, usually on a one-on-one basis, or sponsors group training by technology vendors. The Center also offers training and support in distance learning pedagogy, both by personal consultation and through published courses in Canvas. Completion of the **Teaching Online** course in Canvas meets the University's initial requirement for faculty training in distance learning instruction. Every two years after completing the Teaching Online course, faculty members teaching distance learning courses must complete the Teaching Online Refresher course. New faculty can submit a ticket to the Helpdesk to request enrollment into either course.

The University's Department of Information Technology offers a Help Desk for faculty and students which is staffed 8:30-5:00 on weekdays. On weekends and after hours, distance education faculty are able to access Help Desk personnel through an on-call system. Faculty may access the IT Help Desk by calling 478 301-7000 or 678 547-8989 or through email at [helpdesk@mercer.edu](mailto:helpdesk@mercer.edu). In addition, the College of Pharmacy, College of Health Professions, the College of Professional Advancement, the School of Medicine and the Georgia Baptist College of Nursing employ full-time or instructional designers who are available to assist with distance education technology issues.

## **Technology Requirements and Learning Management System**

Technology recommendations are available to distance education students on [Mercer's Student Information Technology website](#). If your course has additional technology requirements (e.g. webcam, headset, software), it is imperative that this information is communicated to students before they register for a class. All technology requirements should be delineated in course syllabi as well.

The Learning Management System utilized by the University is [Canvas](#). Every course at Mercer has a Canvas shell created for it, and faculty must exclusively use Canvas for course delivery along with the peripheral apps integrated into our Canvas instance. No other course delivery platform may be used unless prior approval has been received from the Provost's office. Mercer uses Zoom for synchronous web-conferencing and Echo360 for video instruction and/or videocapture, both of which are integrated into Canvas. Faculty must always be aware of the policies and processes that apply to distance education when utilizing technology in their online and blended courses.

## **Appendix A**

### **SACSCOC Guidelines in the Application of the *Principles of Accreditation to Distance and Correspondence Education***

With the underlying concept that the *Principles of Accreditation* apply to all programs of the institution, regardless of mode of delivery, institutions should consider the following guideline statements in implementing and reporting on distance and correspondence education programs.

#### ***Mission***

If an institution offers significant distance and correspondence education, it should be reflected in the institution's mission.

#### ***Curriculum and Instruction***

The faculty assumes primary responsibility for and exercises oversight of distance and correspondence education, ensuring both the rigor of programs and the quality of instruction.

The technology used is appropriate to the nature and objectives of the programs and courses and expectations concerning the use of such technology are clearly communicated to students.

Distance and correspondence education policies are clear concerning ownership of materials, faculty compensation, copyright issues, and the use of revenue derived from the creation and production of software, telecourses, or other media products.

Academic support services are appropriate and specifically related to distance and correspondence education.

Program length is appropriate for each of the institution's educational programs, including those offered through distance education and correspondence education.

For all degree programs offered through distance or correspondence education, the programs embody a coherent course of study that is compatible with the institution's mission and is based upon fields of study appropriate to higher education.

For all courses offered through distance or correspondence education, the institution employs sound and acceptable practices for determining the amount and level of credit awarded and justifies the use of a unit other than semester credit hours by explaining its equivalency.

An institution entering into consortial arrangements or contractual agreements for the delivery of courses/programs or services offered by distance or correspondence education is an active participant in ensuring the effectiveness and quality of the courses/programs offered by all of the participants.

## ***Faculty***

An institution offering distance or correspondence learning courses/programs ensures that there is a sufficient number of faculty qualified to develop, design, and teach the courses/programs.

The institution has clear criteria for the evaluation of faculty teaching distance education courses and programs.

Faculty who teach in distance and correspondence education programs and courses receive appropriate training.

## ***Institutional Effectiveness***

Comparability of distance and correspondence education programs to campus-based programs and courses is ensured by the evaluation of educational effectiveness, including assessments of student learning outcomes, student retention, and student satisfaction.

The institution regularly assesses the effectiveness of its provision of library/learning resources and student support services for distance or correspondence education students.

## ***Library and Learning Resources***

Students have access to and can effectively use appropriate library resources.

Access is provided to laboratories, facilities, and equipment appropriate to the courses or programs.

## ***Student Services***

Students have adequate access to the range of services appropriate to support the programs offered through distance and correspondence education.

Students in distance or correspondence programs have an adequate procedure for resolving their complaints, and the institution follows its policies and procedures.

Advertising, recruiting, and admissions information adequately and accurately represent the programs, requirements, and services available to students.

Documented procedures assure that security of personal information is protected in the conduct of assessments and evaluations and in the dissemination of results.

Students enrolled in distance education courses are able to use the technology employed, have the equipment necessary to succeed, and are provided assistance in using the technology employed.

## ***Facilities and Finances***

Appropriate equipment and technical expertise required for distance and correspondence education are available.

The institution, in making distance and correspondence education courses/programs a part of its mission, provides adequate funding for faculty, staff, services, and technological infrastructure to support the methodology.

## Appendix B

### College of Professional Advancement Direct Instruction Template for Distance Education Courses

*Example: The table below represents a sample Direct Instruction Time budget at 2250 minutes per 3 hour course (750 minutes per credit hour). Specific direct instructional activities in minutes to total 2250 minutes. Academic units offering 8-week terms must carefully budget direct instruction to meet the required requirements for time per credit hour. A budget of direct instruction and indirect instruction time must be included in all distance learning course syllabi.*

#### Example Direct Instruction Time Budget

Type of Direct Instruction	# of Minutes Provided to Students
In-class instruction	
In-class tests and quizzes	
In-class student presentations	240 (4 hours of presentations)
Online lectures/instruction (synchronous or asynchronous)	600 (10 one hour sessions)
Online content modules	
Virtual synchronous class meetings	600 (10 one hour synchronous sessions)
Videoconference meetings	
Videoconference presentations	
Online tests/quizzes	240 (6 forty-minute quizzes)
Discussion boards	480 (12 Canvas discussions requiring 40 minutes to complete & respond to other students)
Virtual labs	
Virtual or non-virtual field trips	
Virtual or non-virtual service learning	
Group and/or team-based activities	90 (1 group activity requiring 90 minutes of work)
Audio lectures	
Total should equal:	2, 250 minutes of direct instruction

#### Indirect Instruction Requirement

Additionally, SACSCOC requires that all courses require at least 1,500 minutes of indirect instruction per credit hour. Indirect instruction is also known as study or homework. For a 3-credit hour course, students should be assigned enough work to generate 4,500 minutes or 75 hours of homework and study time. This indirect instruction time is especially important in distance learning instruction, when the instructor's focus may be on meeting the direct instruction time requirement.

## **Appendix C**

### **Mercer University Policy on Intellectual Property Rights and Distance Education**

#### **I. General Principles**

A. Mercer University's academic mission is to preserve, augment, and transmit knowledge and to foster the ability of its students to learn. This mission is best served by creating an intellectual environment that encourages and rewards creativity and innovation, while retaining for the University reasonable access to, and use of, the intellectual property that has been created with institutional support. Mercer supports the development, production, and dissemination of intellectual property by its faculty, staff, and students. This policy addresses issues of ownership and use of such intellectual property, with specific reference to the digital or Internet environment.

B. Mercer reaffirms its commitment to the personal ownership of intellectual property rights in works of the intellect by their individual creators, whether the creators work alone or with others, and whether they work privately or as members of the Mercer community.

C. Notwithstanding this commitment, Mercer also may commission specific works on its own behalf. For example, Mercer may support the creation of works by extraordinary allowances or grants, or it may acquire such works from, or develop them in company with, individual authors on mutually agreeable terms. Each such case shall require a written agreement, and Mercer shall own the intellectual property rights arising from the creation of these works-for-hire. Mercer may thereafter grant licenses or royalties or both to individual creators or contributors on just and reasonable terms.

#### **II. Courses of Instruction Approved for Mercer Credit**

A. Intellectual property rights arising in courses approved for Mercer University credit ordinarily belong to their individual creators in accordance with the general principle expressed in Article I, Section B of this Policy. Rights may also vest in Mercer to the extent that a course (or some portion of it) is acquired or commissioned by Mercer under Article I, Section C.

B. With respect to each such course (and whether the rights in that course belong to an individual creator or to Mercer), every member of the University community (including students, faculty and staff) shall enjoy a non-exclusive, royalty-free license to make all traditional, customary or reasonable academic uses of the content of that course while at Mercer (the "License"). The uses of the intellectual property are subject to the Conflict of Interest and Commitment Policy of each operational or academic unit.

C. The License shall exist automatically when a course is approved for credit by the University, and no additional formality shall be required. No royalty shall be payable for the License; sufficient consideration for such License shall be the mutual benefit realized by Mercer and the creator, as well as by the individual members of the University community.



D. The License also shall include Mercer's right to offer the course, or to develop and offer derivative courses of instruction including courses intended for use in distance education projects, whether at Mercer or elsewhere. The License shall continue to be available to Mercer even if the faculty member in whom individual rights otherwise vest should leave Mercer.

### **III. Distance Education Projects**

A. Mercer may appropriately consider any distance education project that offers the promise of securing and advancing Mercer's mission and reputation. To that end, Mercer may participate in the development of such projects with members of its own community, or it may enter into relationships with persons outside the established academic community. In either case, the University may enter into such projects on terms and conditions that are fair and equitable so long as they do not adversely affect the fundamental principles of governance, tenure, and academic freedom otherwise recognized at Mercer.

B. Mercer faculty members, who are employed on a permanent full time or equivalent basis, and who intend to enter into any non-Mercer distance education project in which they propose to teach a course regularly or recurrently, shall first disclose the proposed undertaking in accordance with the terms of the applicable School or College Policy on Conflicts of Interest or Commitment.

Mercer University will presume a conflict of interest or commitment arises under this Policy on Intellectual Property Rights when faculty or staff members propose to undertake any of the following activities:

(1) teach a non-Mercer distance education course substantially equivalent to a conventional course they have been assigned to teach at Mercer; or

(2) teach a non-Mercer distance education course that is competitive with an existing or proposed Mercer distance education course which they have been offered an opportunity to teach; or

(3) participate in teaching a non-Mercer distance education course in circumstances likely to confuse or mislead the public with respect to their primary obligations or allegiance as members of the Mercer faculty; or

(4) participate in teaching a non-Mercer distance education course in circumstances likely to impair the continuing performance of their primary responsibilities at Mercer.

C. The designated official responsible for examining the proposed undertaking in which a conflict of interest or commitment presumptively arises under Article III, Section B may determine that the conflict is minimal, or that it can be resolved and approved on terms reasonably calculated to serve the best interests of Mercer and the individual faculty or staff member alike. In either case, the designated official shall give notice to that effect in writing within ninety (90) days, both to the individual and to the Provost. In the absence of such a determination, the individual shall not proceed further with the undertaking as proposed while remaining a member of the Mercer faculty or staff.

D. A faculty member who has engaged appropriately in a non-Mercer distance education project shall nevertheless seek approval annually thereafter with respect to his or her continuing participation in that project. If changed circumstances thereafter create a conflict, and the conflict cannot reasonably be cleared, the faculty member will withdraw from the project.

E. The University Advisory Board on Distance Education, appointed annually by the Provost, may develop additional interpretations or regulations reasonably designed to implement these provisions, and may recommend additional requirements with respect to prior disclosure and approval. The purpose of all such additional interpretations, regulations or requirements, however, will be to avoid potential conflicts of interest rather than to limit an individual's ability to engage in acceptable outside professional activities, including distance education projects. To that end, Mercer will exert reasonable efforts to resolve such conflicts of interest and to eliminate any appearance of conflicts of interest through appropriate disclaimers, licenses, or the like.

#### **IV. Exceptions**

The Provost, in consultation with the University Advisory Board on Distance Education, may declare exceptions to these principles.

#### **V. Moral Rights**

The moral rights of individual creators will be respected in every case contemplated by this Policy. In no case will the University fail to recognize an individual creator's entitlement to acknowledgment, attribution or other appropriate credit, to the fullest extent applicable.

#### **VI. University Name and Identity**

A. Intellectual property rights arising in Mercer University's name, logos and other identifying marks belong to Mercer. Such rights may be licensed from time to time upon suitable terms and conditions approved by the President or his designee, taking into full and appropriate account the research, teaching and collegial missions of the University.

B. Members of the Mercer Community may identify themselves as such from time to time, with such indicia of their status as is usual and customary in the academy. Any use of Mercer's name, logos or identifying marks, however, shall be reasonably calculated to avoid any confusing, misleading or false impression of particular sponsorship or endorsement by Mercer, and when necessary shall include specific disclaimers to that end.