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Policy Name

4.4204 Online Course and Education Policy

Purpose and Scope

Regulatory and educational standards for online education have evolved and this policy is necessary to ensure that Alvernia University practices meet these standards. The Alvernia University Online Course and Education Policy provides the framework for the institution's online education courses and programs, and by extension student learning in this modality. This policy applies to all Alvernia University Online courses and Hybrid courses, other than Face-to-Face Web Enhanced courses, as well as to all Alvernia University faculty teaching online or hybrid courses, other than Face-to-Face Web Enhanced courses, or in online educational programs.

Responsibilities

Title or Role	Definition and What They are Responsible For
Senior Vice President of Academic Affairs and Provost	Maintains and enforces this policy. Receives exceptions to the policy.
Senior Leadership Team	Serves as final approval for policy and assists with reviewing exceptions to the policy.

Policy

Each online education course or program must be offered in a manner that is consistent with (i) the standards established by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), (ii) Alvernia University guidelines for course delivery, and (iii) state, and federal laws and requirements, including the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The policies and procedures outlined here will apply regardless of the online education mode (hybrid or online). Alvernia's ADA Instructional Compliance Procedures is a document outlining ADA compliant courses, course materials, and classroom engagement.

Definitions

Accreditation Liaison Officer: An Accreditation Liaison Officer (ALO) is an individual who serves as the primary point of contact between the Middle States Council on Higher Education staff and Alvernia, and as a resource for Alvernia on accreditation processes and related matters.

Course Shell: A semester or module specific instance of a course section connected to Alvernia University's student information system, to which the template shell can be copied.

Face-to-Face Web Enhanced Course: utilizes online modality in less than 30% of its instruction and class activities.

Faculty: The term Faculty for purposes of this policy includes and incorporates herein all categories of faculty status defined in the Alvernia University Faculty Handbook.

Faculty Presence: The ability of the faculty to create a sense of community among learners. Faculty Presence includes but is not limited to providing connections between course content, activities, and assignments, facilitating in-depth thinking through online discussions, providing detailed specific feedback, reaching out to struggling students, making connections to real-world applications, and providing clarification.

Hybrid Course: An individual course that utilizes both face-to-face and online modalities. Specifically, Alvernia University defines “hybrid” as a course in which at least 30% but less than 70% of the contact hours are online.

Instructional Designer (ID): one who provides technical and course design assistance to Faculty in the process of course development.

Learning Management System (LMS): A software application used for the development and delivery of educational courses and programs.

Online Course (hereafter “Online”): An individual course that delivers more than 70% of its content electronically.

Online Education: The regulatory definition of online education is provided in the [22 Pa. Code §31.2](#) definition for Distance Education: An alternate format to resident-based instruction for offering education courses or series of courses by an approved postsecondary educational institution, consortium of institutions or educational enterprise, for which credit is offered or awarded toward a certificate, diploma or degree, which has as its primary mode of delivery one or more of the following:

- Correspondence.
- Television.
- Videocassette or disk.
- Film.
- Radio.
- Computer.
- Devices built upon an audio-video format.
- Other supportive devices using current or future technology.

For purposes of this policy, Alvernia’s working definition of online education includes the delivery of instruction for academic credit when the Faculty is physically located at an address that differs from the physical location of the student at the time of instruction, whether for an entire course or a segment of the course.

Online Learning Instruction Certification Program: Training program developed and delivered at Alvernia and required for Faculty to teach in Online and Hybrid courses (other than Face-to-Face Web Enhanced courses).

Subject Matter Expert (SME): one who provides content for courses and is not necessarily the faculty.

Template Shell: A continuous environment within the LMS used to design and develop a course that is not connected to Alvernia University’s student information system.

Policy Procedure

Copyright and Faculty Ownership of Intellectual Property

Faculty members are cautioned to comply with all copyright regulations in developing materials to be used in online education courses.

Alvernia University adheres to Alvernia’s [Intellectual Property Policy](#) specifying that faculty own the copyright for materials developed for online courses. However, Alvernia and faculty may enter into written agreements about such instructional materials in which both parties agree to vest copyright in either the institution or the faculty, and to provide related licenses.

Program Approval and Accreditation

All academic degree and credential programs must comply with the guidelines of Alvernia and the Pennsylvania Department of Education Department (PDE) pertaining to program registration. For example, any program that enables students to complete 50% or more of the program via online education, must secure approval to do so from Alvernia through the curriculum approval process by working with the Office of the Provost and the Accreditation Liaison Officer to register with MSCHE. The institution must meet MSCHE's standards for programs delivered using "alternative delivery methods." Accredited programs that use online education courses must also satisfy the specific standards of their accrediting bodies. The processes for seeking approval for new online programs and program revisions are built into the curriculum management system (e.g., Curriculog).

Online Education Course Development and Approval

Faculty seeking to propose a new hybrid or online course or convert a face-to-face course to hybrid or online delivery, should consult one of Alvernia University's IDs to evaluate the scope of the work and develop an action plan. The faculty member must submit either a new course or course change proposal through the curriculum management system (e.g., Curriculog). The respective committee, either the Curriculum Committee or the Graduate Academic Council, will consult with an Alvernia University ID to determine the appropriateness of the online learning designation. Once the course has received the appropriate approvals in the curriculum process, the ID then gives the faculty access to a template course shell for preparing the course materials for online delivery. The faculty works further with the ID on the action plan for developing or converting the course based on the intended delivery date.

Online Readiness Review

Before delivery of a new or converted course, a review must be performed by the ID with the Faculty or SME, using an Alvernia approved Course Quality Rubric (CQR). Only after the ID and Faculty or SME agree that the course is ready for online or hybrid delivery will the template shell be copied into a course shell for delivery to students. When necessary due to course approval timing, courses may be reviewed at the same time the course is taught.

Online Course Review Cycle

The review cycle for an online education course is three years. This process will be guided by an ID and provides an opportunity for the Faculty to use available data to revise and improve the course and explore new instructional techniques.

Certification to Teach Online Education Courses

Faculty must be certified to teach online education courses, including hybrid courses, before they can deliver them. In order to be certified, Faculty must register for and successfully complete Alvernia University's Online Learning Instruction Certification Program in advance of delivering courses according to established deadlines or have proof of an Online Learning Instruction Certification from another institution.

Scheduling and Enrollment

When submitting schedules for review by the Dean, departments must clearly indicate which courses will be delivered in online and hybrid modalities, and further define the percentage of the online course component. Departments must also abide by the Alvernia Academic Calendar.

Departments offering online education courses must follow existing prerequisite restrictions and procedures for pre-enrollment and enrollment. Because online media vary in delivery and technical sophistication, and because students enrolled in online education courses must often assume much greater independent responsibility, special restrictions such as technical skills, equipment, cohort requirements, and other expectations may be required as conditions of enrollment in a course or programs. All Alvernia students must have access to computers meeting [Alvernia's Technology Knowledgebase](#). These and all other course and program requirements, notably expectations for face-to-face or other onsite work (e.g., internships or other forms of experiential learning), must be kept current and must be clearly communicated to students.

Use of the Learning Management System

All Faculty teaching online and hybrid education courses must use Alvernia University's LMS, and technical support will be provided for all online education course developers and Faculty.

Pending an Information Technology review of plausibility, third party tools that require, embed, collect, or store private student data must be integrated into Alvernia's LMS to protect student privacy rights. Third-party tools that cannot be integrated into Alvernia University's LMS must not interface with student data in any capacity to ensure FERPA compliance.

Credit Hours, Instruction and Engagement

Both online and hybrid courses must adhere to the [U.S. Department of Education's definition of a credit hour](#):

"an amount of work represented in intended learning outcomes and verified by evidence of student achievement that is an institutionally established equivalency that reasonably approximates not less than—

1. One hour of classroom or direct faculty instruction and a minimum of two hours of out of class student work each week for approximately fifteen weeks for one semester or trimester hour of credit, or ten to twelve weeks for one quarter hour of credit, or the equivalent amount of work over a different amount of time; or
2. An equivalent amount of work as required in paragraph (1) of this definition for other academic activities as established by the institution including laboratory work, internships, practica, studio work, and other academic work leading to the award of credit hours."

At Alvernia, one credit of coursework is equivalent to 750 minutes of class time plus a final/culminating experience and 1500 minutes of out-of-class student work. See the Credit Hour policy link below for additional calculations for student learning experiences.

Faculty Presence in Courses and Office Hours

Faculty Presence is an integral component of quality instruction and a leading indicator of student satisfaction. Faculty in an online education course must make clear to students (i) the days and times that students can expect the Faculty to be active or present in the course for interaction with students, (ii) the method of holding those office hours, and (iii) their expected response time to student queries in their syllabi. Active or present requires both a synchronous engagement with students and presence in the Learning Management System in varying degrees based on asynchronous or synchronous nature of the online course.

Faculty in a Hybrid Course must make clear to students (i) the days and times that students can expect the Faculty to be active or present in the course, (ii) the days and times the course will be face-to-face, (iv) the days face-to-face components of blended courses are on the ground, allowing room-scheduling by the registrar, and (v) the expected response time from faculty to student queries by stating such response time in their syllabi. Faculty teaching online and hybrid education courses, other than web-enhanced courses, must also publish in their syllabi the days and times of their office hours and modality and meet the institution's required number of office hours. Faculty teaching online and hybrid education courses, other than web-enhanced courses, must offer online office hours, but should consider both online and face-to-face office hours to meet student needs.

Verification of Student Identity

Ensuring that a student who registers in an online education course or program is the same student who participates in, completes and receives academic credit for a course or program is a requirement of the [United States Federal Higher Education Opportunity Act, Public Law 110-315](#). Faculty must follow the established policy and procedure set forth below for verifying student identity in online and hybrid courses. Student privacy must be protected in the process, and students must receive information at registration about any additional costs associated with the verification procedures.

Student Services

Support for students taking online education courses includes, but is not limited to, the following areas: academic advisement, accessibility resources, bookstore, career development, enrollment, registration, financial aid, library, technical help, and tutoring. Faculty are required to apprise students of available services. It is expected that personnel responsible for these services will make appropriate and reasonable efforts, within the limits of available staff and resources, to accommodate online education students as is done for students in face-to-face courses.

Student Course Evaluations

Online and hybrid courses will be evaluated by students according to the same evaluation provided in face-to-face courses, delivered online in the case of online courses and delivered online or face-to-face as determined by the timing of the face-to-face sessions.

Assessment

The effectiveness of Alvernia University's online education courses and programs, including students' achievement of defined learning outcomes, must be evaluated according to Alvernia University's assessment processes, and the results used to enhance the attainment of institutional goals for student learning. Online education courses are expected to produce the same learning outcomes as comparable face-to-face courses. These learning outcomes must be clearly specified in course syllabi and program literature.

Course Archives and Record-Keeping

Materials and records for online education courses are subject to Alvernia's Records Retention Policy. Online education courses will be archived in electronic format for at least one year following their completion. Faculty can request access to these archived formats (for courses for which the faculty member is the instructor of record) at any time through the Information Technology Help Desk.

Exceptions to Policy

Exceptions to this policy must be requested in writing by filling out the Policy and Procedure Exception form and submitting to the individual named in the Responsibilities section who assists with reviewing exceptions to this policy.

Policy Review

A comprehensive review of the Online Education Policy will be conducted on a 5-year cycle by Academic Affairs administration with key stakeholders in governance and across campus. An important component of the review process will be consideration of anticipated needs of students and faculty, including academic support services.

Approved versions of this policy will be posted on the Alvernia University Portal

References and Related Policies

This section contains any 3rd party standards, guidelines, or other policies referenced by this policy – add links to policies referenced.

References

[United States Federal Higher Education Opportunity Act, Public Law 110-315](#)

[22 Pa. Code §31.2](#)

Related Policies

15.1000 [Credit Hour](#)

4.4320 [Verification of Student Identity](#)

4.4310 [Intellectual Property Policy](#)

[Technology Knowledgebase](#)

Exhibits

[Policy and Procedure Exception Form](#)

Document Review Log

Date Reviewed	Description of Changes
10/9/23	Initial Draft
10/23-12/23	Faculty Review
1/18/2024	SLT Approval