3.13.4.a Distance learning review

3.13.4.a Policy Compliance: Reaffirmation of Accreditation and Subsequent Reports  An institution includes a review of its distance learning programs in the Compliance Certification.

Judgment of Compliance

In Compliance

Narrative

The University of Alabama (UA) Compliance Certification includes a review of UA’s distance learning programs. Compliance to standards is the same regardless of format of delivery of any academic program. All distance learning programs follow the same program review cycle, have the same expectations of quality, the same student learning outcomes and follow the same process of program approval adhered to by UA main-campus programs regardless of delivery format. In this compliance document, a review of distance learning processes, policies, programs, and reviews has been incorporated into the narratives addressing core requirements, comprehensive standards and federal requirements.

The following samples of narratives from this compliance document provide an example of the comprehensive review of distance programs at UA.

Core Requirements

2.4 Institutional Mission

The University of Alabama’s mission that is addressed in this core requirement emphasizes several themes appropriate for a research university in higher education, with its emphasis on scholarship, teaching, and public service. Its focus is not only on the dissemination of knowledge, but also on the advancement of the intellectual and social condition within global, local, and national contexts. Inherent in the cited concepts are expectations for the institutional leadership and academic distinction in all locations in which UA has a presence, whether on campus, online, or at a distance location.

2.9 Learning Resources and Services

This core requirement addresses the accessibility of learning resources and services for all students, whether on campus or off campus. Multiple systems on UA’s main campus support student and faculty access and user privileges to resources and services. For example, UA Libraries provide 24/7 access to digital resources collections, academic software and technology, and services that are sufficient to support the University’s mission for students and faculty off campus via a campus login. Some of the other services and resources for distance education students described in this narrative include UA’s website, online library instruction, online library reference assistance, interlibrary loans, and US mail and UPS borrowing services.
2.10 Student Support Services

Core requirement 2.10 discusses the many student support services available for students both on campus and at distance locations. For example, the Center for Academic Success provides academic support to improve students’ academic performance. Students enrolled in online courses or pursuing coursework from a distance location may schedule appointments for assistance from the Center for Academic Success via phone, Skype or a Blackboard Collaborate session. Other information provided on student support services in this narrative includes, but is not limited to the Writing Center, where distance consulting is available to students who are physically unable to visit the UA Writing Center; the Office of Information Technology, which provides technical support for distance education faculty, staff, and students and is available via telephone or email; Blackboard, an electronic learning management system that supports online course management; and the Office of Disability Services, which provides support to distance students who require accommodation.

2.8 Faculty

This narrative addresses the adequacy of the number of full-time faculty members and the percentage of courses taught by full-time faculty members on campus, off campus, and online. This narrative affirms that the number of full-time faculty at UA is adequate to ensure the quality and integrity of its academic programs.

Comprehensive Standards

3.3.1.1 Institutional Effectiveness: Educational Programs

This narrative addresses the assessment of student learning outcomes in educational programs. The University expects every degree program to identify student learning outcomes and operational outcomes (if appropriate) and to employ direct and indirect measures to assess the extent to which the outcomes are attained in assessment plans. The requirements for assessment for academic programs at UA do not differ by course delivery format, but are consistent regardless of method of delivery.

3.3.1.2 Institutional Effectiveness: Academic and Student Support Services

At UA, there are 29 units that provide services that support intellectual pursuits; lifelong learning; personal growth; and health, wellness, and enjoyment primarily to students and faculty, whether the student or faculty member is on campus or off campus. In this narrative, evidence is presented that shows that these academic and student support service offices submit plans and reports that include the identification of objectives and outcomes, assessment measures used to monitor achievement of expected outcomes, results from the execution of measures, and action plans for improvements prompted by assessment findings. The requirements for assessment of academic and student support services at UA do not differ between service units or services available to on-campus or off-campus students and faculty.
3.4.9 Academic Support Services

Academic support services at UA involve the collaborative efforts of staff and faculty across the institution to provide services that accentuate student intellectual and social experiences. This narrative addresses the academic support services UA provides for the specific purpose of enhancing the overall success of students. The academic support services described here are available to all students in on-campus, online, and distance-education programs. For example, in the narrative it states that academic advising is available to all students in each of UA’s colleges and schools. Specifically, staff in the College of Continuing Studies assist students in online and distance programs to ensure that they are assigned to an academic advisor. Advising assistance is provided to online and distance students through telephone discussions, email communication, and Web conferencing. At the Gadsden Center, a distance education location, each degree program has a designated advisor assigned for students, who then conducts information sessions and academic advising sessions regularly for face-to-face advising; or through “virtual meetings” via videoconferencing.

3.4.11 Academic Program Coordination

UA assigns responsibility for program coordination, as well as curriculum development and review, to persons academically qualified in the field. The expectation at UA is that program coordinators will hold the terminal degree in the field of the degree program, including off-campus and online delivery options. This narrative provides evidence of the qualifications of the program coordinators for the 39 degree programs and three certificates offered at locations off campus or through electronic means.

3.4.12 Technology Use

This comprehensive standard addresses the technological environment available to all students, faculty, and staff, regardless of location or means of access. For example, included in the narrative are discussions of several technological services such as technology use training, which is available to all students via video-conferencing. Support and resources for technology training and technical support are also provided for fully online courses and distance education classes.

Additionally, evidence presented in this narrative includes discussions of the availability of distance-learning opportunities, and the availability of a mobile application to provide access to needed services. Also discussed is the assignment to all students of a BamaID, access to myBama via the BamaID, a campus email address, and email service. Through myBama, the central authentication portal, students, faculty, and staff can access numerous administrative and student functions, including registering for classes, reviewing grades, receiving financial information, and access to Blackboard Learn. These services are accessible to all students, faculty, and staff whether on campus or off campus.

3.11.2 Institutional Environment

It is a core value of UA to ensure a healthy, safe, and secure environment for all members of the University community, including distance education students. Some of the specific services, programs and systems implemented for distance learning campuses such as the Gadsden Center, located in Gadsden, Alabama, and housed within the University’s College of Continuing Studies, are discussed in this narrative. For example, a Campus Security and Fire Safety Report is provided for the main campus and contains crime statistics for the three most recent calendar years, details on UA security policies and procedures, and provide fire safety information. A Campus Security and Fire Safety Report is also published for the Gadsden Center. Additional services that are available to all students such as online training for hazardous materials handling are also included in the discussion in the narrative.
3.11.3 Physical Facilities

This narrative provides information on the operation and maintenance of facilities, both on campus and off campus, that appropriately serve the institution’s educational programs, support services, and other mission-related activities. Included in the discussion in this narrative are the three course-delivery locations outside of the main campus that are affiliated with the University’s College of Continuing Studies as well as the 58 off-campus buildings that are designed to further the University’s mission. The narrative also includes, but is not limited to, the discussion of the off-campus technological facilities that are connected to the campus network, including wired and wireless networking and telecommunications services; the Virtual Private Network services supporting secure remote access to the campus computing environment; UA's online and distance education program, Bama By Distance, and its support structure; and Blackboard, the primary distance education platform managed and maintained by Blackboard.

Federal Requirements

4.6 Recruitment Materials

The narrative covering Federal requirement 4.6 discusses all recruitment materials at UA and assures that they are updated regularly to accurately represent the institution’s practices and policies on the Web and in print. This narrative includes a discussion of the recruitment materials for Bama by Distance. For example, recruitment materials for Bama By Distance include digital advertising placed in e-newsletters, email, website directories, and banner ads (PDF) in various websites, electronic paid search, direct mail, email blasts, publicity, regional radio advertising, print ads in various publications, and social media. Bama By Distance has in-house Web developers for their specific sites who review and update all of these materials and websites to keep content current.

4.8.1 Distance and Correspondence Education: Student Identity

This narrative provides evidence of the system in place at UA used to verify that a student who registers in a distance learning course is the same student who participates in, completes the course, and receives the credit. It states that a student, upon admission, receives a unique BamaID required to access the secure myBama student portal. It is only through this portal that a student can access BlackBoard, the online course management system. In addition, some distance and online course exams are proctored with identification required for admittance, and some courses include a face-to-face component with the instructor.

4.8.2 Distance and Correspondence Education: Student Privacy

This narrative discusses the policies in place at UA that assure the protection of the privacy of all students, including those enrolled in distance learning courses and programs. The discussion also includes that UA abides by FERPA in protecting the confidentiality of student records, including grades, attendance, and private communications in online courses. Information about this act and other UA privacy policies are published on the Bama By Distance website.

4.8.2 Distance and Correspondence Education: Student Charges

This narrative states that UA does not charge fees for the verification of student identity. UA's fee schedule is publicly available on the Student Receivables website and the Bama By Distance website.