

Regular Effective Contact for Online Courses

Regular and effective faculty-student contact, also known as “regular and substantive interaction,” helps make online courses the equivalent of face-to-face courses for purposes of articulation, apportionment, and financial aid. Accreditation guidelines specify that regular, effective contact with students must be initiated by faculty who teach online courses (See [ACCJC Guide to Evaluating DE, pp.2-4](#); [CCCCO 2008 DE Guidelines §55204, p. 7](#)). Regular effective contact must be

1. Initiated by the instructor
2. Regular and frequent
3. Meaningful or of an academic nature

Examples and Best Practices

As technology changes, so also do the many ways faculty can maintain regular and effective contact with their online students. The following list is by no means definitive as new examples emerge.

Announcements

Regular course announcements can be made that reflect on activities taking place in the course or elsewhere. Students can reply back to course announcements. The announcement tool is highly effective because it can be used regularly (we recommend at least once per week at minimum), and because it keeps a permanent record of the faculty-initiated contact.

Discussion Boards

Faculty can participate in discussion boards and post reactions, comments, and questions to their students’ posts that further students’ thinking and take the discussion deeper. Some faculty are reluctant to participate because they feel that doing so may stifle free expression among students. In this case, interaction may take place in the gradebook feedback area. Another option may be to provide a summary or highlight of the discussion’s best posts as a course announcement, inviting further thought and reflection from students.

Q & A Discussion Boards

Faculty can invite students to post questions and faculty can provide answers in a Q & A discussion board. As evidence of *regular* and effective faculty-initiated student contact, it is

recommended that faculty periodically post announcements inviting student participation in the Q & A discussion board.

Assignment Feedback

Feedback to different assignments is regularly initiated by the instructor and provides students an opportunity to reply to that feedback.

Office Hours and Conferences

Group or individual video or telephone meetings give students opportunities to interact with the instructor. In-person and/or online video, telephone, chat, or other office hours qualify similarly as effective faculty-student contact. It is recommended that faculty use the announcements tool to remind students regularly about these options in order to create a record of faculty-initiated contact.

Third-Party Tools

Faculty can also embed or use third party tools for communication with their students. Social media sites, texting tools, blogs, and other resources can provide effective means of faculty-initiated contact. It is recommended that faculty use the announcements tool to remind students regularly about these options in order to create a record of faculty-initiated contact.

The Online Course Syllabus

The syllabus is an important resource for providing students with information about how to reach the instructor (instructor contact information) and what the instructor's plan is for returning calls, answering emails, providing assignments feedback, participating in online discussions, and other modes of contact. In this way, the syllabus becomes a single instance of faculty-initiated contact with students. Students should be reminded of these options via course announcements or other forms of regular, effective, faculty-initiated contact.

Email

Email can be an especially effective tool for faculty initiated contact with students. However, email does not leave a record tied to the course. For contacting an entire class, it is recommended that faculty use the Announcement tool instead. Unless students alter the notification settings in the LMS, a copy of the announcement goes to the students' email accounts. For contacting individual students through email, it is important to document the instructor's email policy and expected reply time in the course syllabus (usually 24-48 hours).

Records of Regular Effective Contact

Not all types of faculty-initiated contact are recorded in online courses. Discussions and announcements can be easily accessed and documented. Student feedback is normally provided in the gradebook area. However, email, office hours, video conferences, phone calls, the use of third-party tools, and other types of effective contact are normally not permanently recorded within the course. In cases like this, it becomes important to describe and quantify these activities in the course syllabus, which is a permanent record. For example, with office hours, the instructor might describe where and in what modality (in person and/or online or through video) the hours take place. To quantify, the instructor would include the frequency of the office hours (what days of the week and at what time, for example).

Frequency

Distance Education courses are considered the “virtual equivalent” of face-to-face courses in terms of the student experience ([See ACCJC Guide to Evaluating DE, p. 46](#)). The number of instructor contact hours per week that would be available for face-to-face students should also be available, in asynchronous and/or synchronous mode, with students in the online format. Contact should be distributed each week as is appropriate for the contact hours described in the course outline of record.

Accreditation and Financial Aid Audits

Courses described as “distance education” can be reclassified by auditors as correspondence courses after the fact, which can be traumatic for students in terms of articulation and matriculation, and traumatic financially for the college in terms of refunding allocated financial aid and apportionment. To help colleges maintain the integrity of their online programs, the ACCJC follows the [Guide to Evaluating Distance and Education and Correspondence Education \(2013\)](#) during accreditation site visits. ACCJC routinely checks online courses for evidence of Regular Effective Contact during site visits.

Definition

Distance Education (DE) is a mode of education and instruction that uses one or more technologies to deliver course content to students who are separated from the instructor and that supports regular and substantive interaction between the student and instructor, either synchronously or asynchronously.

Distance Education Courses vs. Correspondence Courses

The distinction between a Distance Education Course and a Correspondence Course is important in regard to Regular Effective Contact.

By education code, DE courses are the virtual equivalent of face-to-face courses ([See ACCJC Guide to Evaluating DE, p. 46](#)) and therefore qualify for financial aid and apportionment. DE courses also normally articulate to four-year colleges.

Distance education courses demonstrate “regular and effective contact between instructor and students, through group or individual meetings, orientation and review sessions, supplemental seminar or study sessions, field trips, library workshops, telephone contact, correspondence, voice mail, email, or other activities” ([CCCCO 2008 DE Guidelines §55204, p. 6](#)).

In correspondence courses, on the other hand, interaction with the instructor is limited, and there may be no interaction with peers because correspondence courses are usually self-paced. Pointedly, a correspondence course is “Not distance education” ([Code of Federal Regulations, Title 34 \(Ed Code\), § 602.3](#)).

The California Community College Chancellor’s Office explains “regular and effective contact” this way: It is “the responsibility of the instructor in a DE course to initiate regular contact with enrolled students to verify their participation and performance status. The use of the term ‘regular effective contact’ in this context suggests that students should have frequent opportunities to ask questions and receive answers from the instructor of record” ([CCCCO 2008 DE Guidelines §55204, p. 7](#)).