

Standards and Criteria for Distance Learning



ADMINISTRATION FOR
CHILDREN & FAMILIES



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This brief is one of a series that accompany the Distance Learning Planning and Implementation Guide. These resources are designed to help State/Territory decisionmakers increase the capacity of their professional development (PD) systems by providing additional access to distance learning. For more information visit <https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/resource/distance-learning-planning-and-implementation-guide-0>.

This brief outlines State examples of distance learning (DL) standards, information about calculating contact and/or credit hours for DL, and qualifications for DL instructors.

COURSE APPROVAL AND CREDIT

Standards and criteria for course development and instruction provide a foundation for quality assurance efforts within PD systems. Institutions of higher education (IHE) use national DL standards and criteria to design, deliver, and evaluate DL programs. These standards and criteria can also guide the development and approval of other credit- and non-credit-bearing courses. DL can be an effective PD method for helping students build skills, acquire credentials and certificates, and move along a career pathway. To accomplish this, DL criteria must align with the PD system's trainer and training approval system, as well as national standards for EC professional preparation.

The following examples illustrate how States review, approve, and assign contact and/or credit hours for PD delivered in a DL format.

State Examples

Georgia's Training Approval System evaluates distance training/learning submissions much like face-to-face training applications. In addition, DL submissions must show evidence of direct communication with a trainer or organizational contact via telephone, email, discussion forum, etc. Trainers must also include a rationale for the training hours requested (e.g., training hours must match the estimated time it will take learners to read materials, complete assignments, etc.). Finally, the training must show evidence of the learner's interaction with the training content.

Vermont Northern Lights Career Development Center verifies and approves noncredit-bearing online PD training for EC and afterschool professionals in Vermont. Northern Lights staff, or those designated by the staff, review submissions for approval. Once approved, sponsors' websites linking to the online training post to the Northern Lights Web site. The Vermont Northern Lights Web site outlines the history of the approval system, the process for approving non-credit-bearing online courses, PDFs of the application form and scoring rubric, and the criteria for approval.

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Vermont uses Continuing Education Credits (CEUs) as a standard unit of measurement to quantify continuing education and training activities and accommodate the diversity of providers, activities, and purposes in adult education. One CEU equals 10 contact hours of learner interaction with the content of the learning activity. Calculating contact and/or credit hours for an online course is generally based on:

- Time spent in live instruction including synchronous or instructor-led online time
- The number of screens viewed in the course of online instruction—average time spent on a "screen" is usually between 3–5 minutes
- Run-time for required media assignments calculated on a 1:1 ratio to seat time—including self-playing videos or animation, or audio podcasts and recordings.
- Links to external learning resources—the time required to interact with course content by: reading an article, watching a self-paced instructional video, or playing an instructional game
- Assignments—time spent in online instructional (not homework) assignments and activities like postings to group discussion sites/bulletin boards, online group project work, use of class social media sites for group discussion/participation, or student-teacher interaction

INSTRUCTOR QUALIFICATIONS AND CERTIFICATION

Course development standards and delivery are critical to effective online learning experiences, as are the knowledge and skills of instructors. Playing the role of the “guide on the side” requires a unique skill set. Instructor certification programs, like the State examples below, develop and verify the competencies needed for successful online course development and delivery.

State Examples

[Illinois’ Online Network, Master Online Teacher Certificate](#) is a comprehensive faculty development program based on the [Making the Virtual Classroom a Reality](#) series of online faculty PD. This program recognizes and certifies faculty, staff, and administrators who achieve a measurable level of knowledge in online course design, online instruction, and other issues related to online teaching and learning. To earn the Master Online Teacher certificate, participants must successfully complete four core courses, one elective course, and an online teaching practicum. Certificate coursework topics include online communications and collaboration, technologies available for delivering online courses, learning activities in online courses, and online methods of assessment.

[North Carolina’s LEARN NC: Carolina Online Teacher Program](#) is an online training program for virtual instructors. The program consists of five core courses and two electives, totaling a minimum of 17 CEUs. The training covers the skills needed to teach effectively in an online learning setting: effective collaboration and facilitation, creating learning communities, navigating the virtual classroom, and developing student-centered instruction. The NC program also includes a practicum in online teaching where training participants teach an online course to a pilot group of students or teachers. An experienced online-learning mentor guides training participants through typical challenges that may arise in online instruction.