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DISTANCE EDUCATION GUIDELINES FOR CONTINUING EDUCATION

Introduction

Over the past several years, distance education and distance learning have become popular “buzz words” which represent an idea that has spawned heated debates. The idea that credible learning can occur when students and an instructor are not in the same location at the same time is one which generates a variety of responses. While distance education has gained vast popularity in many regions of the country, until very recently it has not been widely accepted in regard to real estate continuing education in North Carolina. However, rule changes which became effective in 2000 now make distance education a possibility for the real estate licensees of North Carolina.

Distance education encompasses many different delivery methods: Computer-based training (CBT), Internet/Web-based training, Videotape, Satellite Interactive TV, Mixed Media, and Correspondence. Because of the variety of delivery systems, it is essential not only that stringent rules and guidelines be in place for distance education, but that those standards are well-explained and understood in order to maintain and protect the quality and integrity of the continuing education program.

The purpose of this document is to provide some explanation of the Commission’s standards for distance education, as set forth in Commission Rule 58E.0310, which addresses distance education courses, to developers and sponsors of prospective distance education courses, and ultimately to ensure that any distance education courses subsequently approved will meet the needs of the licensees while complying with all previously established Commission Rules governing the continuing education program.

This information should be utilized in addition to the Commission’s Mandatory Continuing Education Rules and the *Continuing Education Elective Course Approval Guidelines*. It does not contain all rules, requirements, and information affecting course sponsors, developers, and/or instructors. It is not, nor is it intended to be, a replacement or substitute for reading both publications mentioned above. It is essential that anyone attempting to use the information presented here first be familiar with the Commission’s CE Rules and the above-referenced *Guidelines*.

The distance education guidelines present each individual section of Commission Rule 58E.0310 and explain the distance education issues that each section addresses. The issue is identified first, followed by the text of the rule, which is in italics. Following the text of the rule are comments and examples.

Rule .0310 DISTANCE EDUCATION COURSES

DEFINITION AND SCOPE

(a)As used in this Chapter, the term “distance education” shall be understood to refer to educational programs in which instruction is accomplished through the use of media whereby teacher and student are separated by distance and sometimes by time. An entity requesting approval of a distance education course must, in addition to satisfying all other requirements for elective course approval specified in this Section, demonstrate that the proposed distance education satisfies the following criteria:

- Comments:** Item (a) accomplishes two things:
1. it **defines** what is meant by **distance education**, and
 2. it establishes that any proposed distance education course applicant **must satisfy all other applicable requirements for elective course approval** (summarized at the end of these guidelines) **in addition to the specific criteria enumerated in Rule .0310.**

SPECIAL NOTE: *Distance education courses delivered via different distance delivery methods need to gain approval for each different delivery method if CE credit for each is desired.* For example, a sponsor has an approved CBT course entitled “Buyer Representation,” but the sponsor now wishes to take the same content and create a web or Internet-based course. Because the technological differences between a CBT course and an Internet course can be great, the sponsor must make application for two different courses — “Buyer Representation - CBT” and “Buyer Representation - Internet” if the sponsor wants both courses approved for CE credit.

INTERACTION

(1)The course shall be designed to assure that students actively participate in the instructional process while completing the course by utilizing techniques that require substantial student interaction with the instructor, other students or a computer program. The course design must not permit students to merely sit passively and observe instruction or read instructional materials. If the nature of the subject matter is such that the learning objectives for the course cannot be reasonably accomplished without some direct interaction between the instructor and students, then the course design must provide for such interaction.

Comments: **Interaction**, for our purposes, is defined as **involvement and/or participation by the student in the learning process.** This interaction can take one of three forms: student with instructor, student with other student(s), or student with a computer program. Therefore, if a distance education course is delivered via correspondence, student-instructor interaction may take the form of written correspondence or telephone conversations. On the other hand, if the course is delivered via the Internet, the student may be asked to interact with the instructor through e-mail as well as (or instead of) by telephone, and the student may interact with other students through e-mail and chat-rooms as well. If the course is delivered via a computer program, that program must be designed in such a way that it requires action from the student. For example, in addition to presenting information for the student to read, the program must ask the student to work problems, or answer questions based on the information provided, and so on.

Finally, while there may be subject matter for which the learning objectives can be achieved without direct student-instructor interaction, the learning objectives for certain topics may require interaction between the instructor and student, without which those objectives cannot be met. For example, a computer-based course with the objective of educating licensees about federal and state fair housing laws may very well meet its learning objectives without direct interaction between the instructor and student. However, an ethics course with the objective of teaching licensees how to handle various ethical dilemmas within real estate transactions would, in all likelihood, require discussion and feedback between an instructor and the student(s).

ASSURING STUDENT MASTERY

(2) A course that does not provide the opportunity for continuous audio and visual communication between the instructor and all students during the course presentation shall utilize testing and remedial processes appropriate to assure student mastery of the subject material.

Comments: Most distance education courses do not provide continuous audio and visual communication between instructor and student; therefore most must include some method of checking for student understanding and assuring mastery of the information. This is most frequently accomplished through requiring the student periodically to answer a series of questions designed to measure his/her grasp of the material.

In a traditional correspondence course, and possibly in the case of videotape courses, the student is required to complete a test(s) [single test for very short courses or a series of tests for longer courses] which must be completed and returned to the instructor. Once the instructor has evaluated the student's responses, the student should receive feedback from the instructor. That feedback should include clarification of any incorrect responses for remedial purposes.

In a computer-based course, appropriate testing and remedial processes to assure student mastery of the subject material may be accomplished by questions asked periodically throughout each section of the course and at the end of each section of the course. Questions may be presented in various formats including True-False, Matching, Multiple-Choice, and Fill-the-Blank. If the student selects an incorrect answer, s/he must be given the correct answer and the rationale for that answer. Then, at some point before the end of that particular section, the student must see that question again (preferably in a different format) and respond correctly. Mastery is determined when the student answers a pre-determined percentage of the questions correctly. For example, one computer program may use a pass rate of 90% overall; another might require students to answer all the questions correctly twice before they're allowed to advance. Whatever the passing percentage, when it is met, the student is allowed to advance to the next module containing new information where the whole process is followed again. If the student does not perform well on a section, s/he is required to go through the information again and is tested again before gaining access to new information, or before being considered to have completed the course. Once the student has been allowed to complete the entire course, the student's data disk must be returned to the sponsor for verification of satisfactory completion of the course.

CLASSROOM HOUR EQUIVALENCY

(3) A course that involves students completing the course on a self-paced study basis shall be designed so that the time required for a student of average ability to complete the course will be at least four hours. The number of equivalent classroom hours assigned by the course sponsor or developer to the course must be supported by appropriate studies or field tests, and the applicant must submit a description of such studies or field tests with the course application.

Comments: Virtually all distance education courses are self-paced. Whether the course is traditional correspondence, videotaped instruction, or computer-based training program or via Internet, the student determines when s/he will work on the subject matter and for how long at a time. For those reasons, developers must have established classroom hour standards.

Commission Rule .0304(a)(4) requires that all continuing education elective courses involve a minimum of four classroom hours of instruction which we have defined as 200 minutes. Therefore, all distance education courses must be designed so that the average student would need roughly 200 minutes total in order to successfully complete the material.

Correspondence courses would include in their field tests the time required to read the material, to answer questions, and to take tests. Videotaped instruction should include the time needed to view the tape and then respond to questions. Computer-based courses **must** employ a timing mechanism which begins timing once the student has logged into the system and has opened the first screen that contains the subject material. Should the student remain inactive for longer than is reasonable without either advancing to the next screen and/or answering the questions which **must** be posed periodically throughout the course, the timer must stop. What is a “reasonable” amount of time for student inactivity with the computer program may vary from subject to subject. For example, if the subject matter is real estate math and the student stops interacting with the computer in order to work a problem with pencil and paper, an inactivity “window” of two minutes might be reasonable. However, if the subject matter is environmental issues and the student is posed a multiple choice question about underground storage tanks, 30 seconds may be a more appropriate inactivity time-frame.

Acceptable studies or field tests should involve a minimum of 10 different individuals having completed the course and a record of their times documented. The average of the 10 (or more) completion times **must** be a minimum of 200 minutes.

INSTRUCTIONAL DELIVERY METHODS & SCOPE/DEPTH OF INSTRUCTION

(4) The proposed instructional delivery methods shall be appropriate to enable effective accomplishment of the proposed learning objectives and the scope and depth of the instructional materials must also be consistent with the proposed learning objectives.

Comments: In determining which distance education delivery method is appropriate for what subject matter, it is helpful to consider how necessary student-instructor interaction is to the accomplishment of the learning objectives. For example, a great deal of instructor-student interaction may be unnecessary in reaching the objectives for a

course entitled “Basic House Construction.” Such a course could be successfully presented via computer program. But other real estate subject matter, such as certain agency topics and ethics, may need a great deal of instructor-student interaction and thus a computer program delivery of such material would be inappropriate. A more effective distance education approach for such topics might be an Internet-based course or satellite interactive TV which would facilitate greater instructor-student communication.

Because of the limited availability of instructors with most distance learning delivery methods, creating materials of sufficient scope and depth is critical. To illustrate, suppose one learning objective of a course is “At the end of this section of instruction, the student will have a thorough understanding of how to apply agency concepts in various real estate situations.” However, the materials for the course are a review of the basic agency duties with minimal or no specific examples. In this case the scope and depth of the course is not sufficient to meet the instructional objective.

TECHNICAL SUPPORT

(5) The sponsor shall provide appropriate technical support to enable students to satisfactorily complete the course.

Comments: Hopefully, distance education courses delivered via correspondence or videotape will not necessitate a great deal of technical support, but at the very minimum, the student should have a telephone number of an individual trained to respond to questions regarding the delivery method used in the course. For delivery methods in which technical problems may be likely, such as computer-based, Internet/Web-based training, technical support should be available in a number of ways. For example, a student experiencing difficulties with the computer-based course should be provided a phone number which will put him in contact with a member of the sponsor’s technical support staff who can troubleshoot the question(s). In addition to telephone support, we recommend that sponsors provide an e-mail address whereby a technical support person can be reached. Finally, if possible, a website that presents ‘Frequently Asked Questions’ for users of the software could partially fulfill this requirement.

If the problem is with the actual software, new materials should be immediately dispatched to the student if necessary. Otherwise, the technician should be prepared to ‘walk the student’ through the process necessary to get the program up and running.

INSTRUCTOR AVAILABILITY AND TRAINING

(6) An instructor shall be assigned to each student and the instructor-student ratio must permit the instructor to be reasonably available to provide any necessary instructor-student interaction, to respond in a timely manner to student questions about the subject matter of the course and to direct students to additional sources of information. Instructors shall have appropriate training in the proper use of the instructional delivery method utilized in the course, including the use of computer hardware and software or other equipment and systems.

Comments: Student-teacher ratio shall not exceed a number which would make personal contact with students impossible to maintain. We expect this ratio will be self-establishing and self-correcting over time, as at this point, the newness of the distance education

format precludes any sponsor giving us hard data as to numbers of students completing CE in this manner.

Rather than specifying some fixed maximum ratio, the Commission will look more to the sponsor's actual experience in providing the course. If significant complaints about this matter are received, an inquiry would be initiated to determine if the standard for reasonable instructor availability is being met.

As far as training is concerned, the instructor is expected to have expertise not only in the subject matter presented, but also in the delivery method utilized in presenting the material. For example, if an instructor is presenting a Fair Housing course via satellite interactive TV, the instructor must be knowledgeable of Fair Housing Laws and must have past experience in conducting courses via satellite interactive TV. Likewise, if the course is computer-based, or Internet-based, the instructor of record should know the subject matter and also be extremely familiar with the computer program, or the manner in which the course is presented via Internet so that the instructor can readily understand and respond to any questions the student may have.

INFORMATION PROVIDED TO STUDENTS

(7) The sponsor shall provide students an orientation or information package which contains all information required by the Commission to be provided to students and all necessary information about the course, including but not limited to information about course fees and refund policies, course subject matter and learning objectives, procedures and requirements for satisfactory course completion, any special requirements with regard to computer hardware and software or other equipment and systems.

Comments: The sponsor's orientation package must include:

1. course overview of subject matter,
2. the course learning objectives,
3. requirements for receiving satisfactory credit, including completion deadline (June 10th at 11:59 p.m.),
4. course fee and refund policy (if any),
5. instructor name(s) and how instructor may be contacted,
6. course materials (manual, disk(s), CD-ROMs, etc.),
7. computer hardware/software requirements,
8. directions for installation and for tutorial,
9. a section on "troubleshooting",
10. instructions for obtaining technical support,
11. course evaluation form to be completed by student, and
12. address to which students must send their completed materials (Disks, paperwork, etc.)

SPECIFIC INSTRUCTIONS FOR COMPUTER-BASED COURSES

(b) An entity seeking approval of a computer-based distance education course must submit a complete copy of the course on the medium that is to be utilized and, if requested, must make available, at a date and time satisfactory to the Commission and at the sponsor's expense, all hardware and software necessary for the Commission to review the submitted course. In the case of an Internet-based course, the Commission must

be provided access to the course via the Internet at a date and time satisfactory to the Commission and shall not be charged any fee for such access.

Comments: An entity seeking approval of a computer-based distance education course must submit the following:

1. completed written application prescribed by the Commission (with required additional information),
2. nonrefundable \$100 processing/application fee,
3. course materials (CD ROM, disks, Internet access, etc.),
4. evidence/results of time studies/field tests, and
5. student orientation package.

Other Requirements

As stated in Rule .0305(a), an entity requesting approval of a distance education course must also satisfy **all other requirements** (not just Rule .0305) for elective course approval specified in this Section. Several rules in the .0300 Section address the purpose of elective courses, the application process, student fees, subject matter, and instructor qualifications. Naturally, all these rules still apply.

Special attention needs to be paid to the rules governing the criteria for elective course approval and appropriate subject matter (Rules .0304 and .0305). Elective courses presented in distance learning formats must still **cover a real estate topic that is directly related to real estate brokerage practice**. A proposed distance education elective course must still **directly** contribute to the accomplishment of the primary purpose of mandatory continuing education which is to help assure that licensees possess the knowledge, skills, and competency necessary to function in the real estate business in a manner that **protects and serves the public interest**. The knowledge or skills taught in a distance education elective course must enable licensees to **better serve real estate consumers**. Finally, if there are unique North Carolina laws, rules or customary practices that are relevant to a topic being addressed in a distance education elective course which is developed for use by North Carolina licensees, then **the course must accurately and completely address such North Carolina laws, rules or practices**.

ARELLO CERTIFIED COURSES

If an entity is making application to the Commission for a course which has previously received ARELLO certification, the application process is somewhat streamlined. Depending upon the nature of the ARELLO certification (Primary Provider or Secondary Provider) and whether the entity will be an original or subsequent sponsor, the entity may not be required to address certain requirements (see application form).