



COMTA Distance Education Guidelines

These policies support and extend COMTA Accreditation Standard X. As such, institutions and programs which offer distance education—fully online or hybrid—must demonstrate compliance with both.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE: Distance education (both fully online and hybrid courses) utilizes technology to create enriching virtual classroom experiences. Distance education must meet the criteria of supporting regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor. (Independent study or correspondence courses do not meet that criterion.) The Commission acknowledges that there are some competencies within a massage/bodywork or esthetics program that may be taught through distance education. These competencies typically do not involve hands-on work or require instant oversight or feedback. Programs using distance education must demonstrate continued compliance with these and other applicable standards.

Distance Education

Distance education means education that uses technology to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor. Distance education includes both fully online courses and hybrid courses which include some online and some in-class time. However, distance education should not be confused with Correspondence Education or Independent Study, which are not eligible for accreditation by COMTA. (See COMTA Definition of Terms below for full description and applicable terms).

COMTA allows for portions of programs or courses to be taught via Distance Education, provided the requirements in Standard X are met and appropriate approvals are first obtained.

Allowable Amount of Distance Education

Generally, COMTA encourages the use of innovative teaching methods including those available using distance methods. However, it is important to note that the fields of massage therapy and esthetics are professions in which the hands-on skills of the practitioner are paramount, and many students who are drawn to this type of work are more kinesthetically inclined than in other academic subjects. COMTA does not accredit programs with more than 49% of the content taught via Distance Education methods. Furthermore, some of the COMTA Curriculum Competencies require student demonstration of skill, which would not be appropriate for distance education methods.

During the accreditation process, the school will be asked to explain how they have determined the amount of clock hours or credits which will be awarded for each class using distance education methods. There should be some method for calculating the amount of time an average student would need to complete the assigned work, with a reasonable allowance for some students to complete it faster and others who need more time. The Commission does not expect

that individual students will have hours calculated for their work, but documentation of student work should be maintained to confirm that the hours awarded are reasonably appropriate on average.

Learning Management Systems (LMS) or Online Textbook

Distance Education methods have been developing rapidly over the past several years. A small school or program offering only a portion of a course via distance education may not need to use a traditional Learning Management System (LMS) (see the COMTA Definition of Terms below for details), but a similar platform which facilitates interaction and accountability is required.

Many textbook companies now provide auxiliary tools to expand the resources available to students and instructors. While the technology behind some of them is increasingly similar to an LMS platform, some of these resources are inadequate for being considered “distance education”, particularly if the materials do not include interaction with fellow students or an instructor. However, the materials could still be beneficial for students as homework or support for integrating information learned in class. The Commission makes the distinction in terms of what the school awards clock hours or credits for versus activities that are simply part of the work a student is expected to do in order to learn the course content. When selecting an LMS or similar platform to develop the distance education program, schools should pay careful attention to whether it meets all the requirements of Standard X.

Impact on Professional Licensing

In some jurisdictions, professional practice laws prohibit the use of distance education methods for meeting entry-level education requirements for massage therapy and/or esthetics. In some cases, this may mean that a program does not qualify graduates for licensed practice outside of the campus where the program is offered. Therefore, it is important for prospective students to be notified of the details of how much distance education will be included in the program, whether the courses must be taken via distance methods or an on-campus option is available, and whether or not the program is approved for professional practice in any other states or jurisdictions. The institution is responsible for ensuring that these issues are part of the information made available to prospective students in writing, prior to enrollment.

Institutions are responsible for ensuring that student records include documentation of whether a course was completed on-campus or via distance methods.

Programs greater than 50% online

Some states have reported to COMTA that the demand for trained practitioners is so high that they must allow for more innovative educational programs to meet the needs of employers. There have been indications that programs with more than 50% of the content delivered via distance education may be serving these needs. Although COMTA does not accredit such programs at this time, we encourage schools offering this type of program to stay connected to the professional community and share your successes. For information on accreditation of

institutions and programs which are primarily offered via distance education, we suggest contacting the Distance Education Accrediting Commission (DEAC), www.deac.org.

Important Definitions
(from COMTA Definition of Terms, Appendix C)

Distance Education: Per USDE regulations, *distance education* means education that uses one or more of the technologies listed in paragraphs (1) through (4) of this definition to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor, either synchronously or asynchronously. The technologies may include: (1) The internet; (2) One-way and two-way transmissions through open broadcast, closed circuit, cable, microwave, broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite, or wireless communications devices; (3) Audio conferencing; or (4) Video cassettes, DVDs, and CD–ROMs, if the cassettes, DVDs, or CD–ROMs are used in a course in conjunction with any of the technologies listed in paragraphs (1) through (3) of this definition. *See also Correspondence Education.*

Correspondence Education: Per USDE Definition, correspondence means education provided through one or more courses by an institution under which the institution provides instructional materials, by mail or electronic transmission, including examinations on the materials, to students who are separated from the instructor. Correspondence education is not distance education and **COMTA is not recognized to accredit correspondence education courses.**

Hybrid: A distance education course which involves some in-class, face-to-face instruction and some online requirements. The course may be taught primarily online with some regularly scheduled on-campus classroom meetings. A course is considered “hybrid” if students are earning hours or credits for the work/time devoted when not in the classroom. If credit or hours are not awarded, distance education methods may be used as supplementary tools for a regular course and do not need to be approved by COMTA. *See also Distance Education.*

Learning Management System (LMS): The technology platform through which students access online courses. A LMS generally includes software for creating and editing course content, communication tools, assessment tools, and other features for managing the course. The LMS should be appropriate to the size and scope of the distance learning program, either including large-scale platforms (e.g. Blackboard, Moodle) or it could include publisher-based or internal systems if they meet the Distance Education standards.

Asynchronous: Types of online courses that do not require students to meet online at specific times. Interaction between students and teacher occurs in different places and at different times. Typically students will still be required to meet certain deadlines.



Synchronous: A type of online course where classes have a scheduled meeting time in which students must attend virtually. Interaction between students and teacher occurs in “real time.”

Proctored Assessment: A proctored assessment is an exam that is administered by an individual who supervises the student while they are taking the exam. The proctor’s function is to ensure the integrity and security of the exam in a secure environment.