American River College Curriculum Committee Standards for *Regular Effective Contact* and *Regular and Substantive Interaction* in Online Classes

Rationale

Title 5, section 55204, states "district governing boards shall ensure that: (a) Any portion of a course conducted through distance education includes regular effective contact between instructor and students." In addition, the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) requires that Distance Education courses ensure that there is "regular and substantive interaction between the students and instructor." American River College's Curriculum Committee has determined that Title 5's requirement for "regular effective contact" is functionally equivalent to ACCJC's requirement for "regular and substantive interaction" in that both guarantee the student receives the benefit of the instructor's active presence in the learning environment as a provider of instructional information and as a facilitator of student learning.

The Distance Education Guidelines provided by the California Community College Chancellor's Office require colleges to develop a policy regarding regular effective contact that addresses "the type and frequency of interaction appropriate to each DE course/section or session." In a face-to-face course the instructor is present at each class meeting and interacts with students through class announcements, lectures, activities and discussions that take a variety of forms. The instructor also serves as a content advisor when he or she answers questions both as they come up in class and as they arise in individual situations. Title 5 regulations do not make a distinction between face-to-face and distance education courses beyond the need to have a separate curriculum approval process and the need to ensure regular effective contact. Therefore, it is assumed that those qualities of regular effective contact described above for the face-to-face environment should also be applied to the distance education situation.

Types of Regular Effective Contact

Each DE course at American River College, whether hybrid or fully online, will include one or more forms of regular effective contact appropriate for that course. Not every course will require every kind of contact, and additional types of contact may be considered regular, effective, and substantive by the Curriculum Committee. The following list is intended to be a guide for instructors to ensure that their online courses fulfill the requirements for regular effective contact.

➤ **Student-Initiated Contact:**
  • **Asynchronous Communication:** When contacted via voicemail or e-mail by a student, the instructor responds in a timely manner clearly outlined in the class syllabus, so the contact with the student is reasonably prompt, albeit not instantaneous. This contact is effective because it responds to specific concerns and questions of individual students.

- **Moderating a Discussion Forum:** Depending on the structure of the class and the function of the specific virtual space, when a student posts a message in an open, public space in an online class the instructor responds in a timely manner clearly outlined in the class syllabus, so the contact is reasonably prompt, albeit not instantaneous. This contact is effective because it responds to specific concerns and questions of individual students, yet the responses are shared in a public arena, so all students can benefit from the question of one student.
- **Synchronous Office Hours:** These are specific hours of specific days when a student can interact with an instructor. These can be physical synchronous office hours where the instructor is present on campus in a specific office. These synchronous office hours can also be times when the instructor is available via various technologies, including but not limited to telephone, e-mail, audio conferencing (*i.e.,* CCCConfer), video conferencing, and chat rooms. This contact is effective because it responds to specific concerns and questions of individual students.

➢ **Instructor-Initiated Contact**
- **Announcements:** These are posts that update students on the content or the processes of the class. They can be in written, audio, or video format. This type of contact is effective because it demonstrates that the instructor is present in the class and is moderating the progress of individual students and the class as a whole. This type of contact is regular – at a minimum, these announcements will happen at least once a week, but more frequent posting of announcements would almost universally enhance the effectiveness of the contact.
- **Individual Contact with Students via e-mail or phone:** There may be times when the instructor needs to contact individual students. These contacts might be for the purposes of checking the status of the student in the institution, reminding the student of responsibilities, or asking the student questions about the material. This type of contact is effective because it provides an opportunity for one-on-one interaction between student and instructor, which Chickering and Gamson's "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education" lists as a primary element in success. Although this type of contact may be regular and periodic, it happens more often on an as-needed basis.
- **Leading Threaded Discussions:** This type of interaction is very much like "Moderating a Discussion Forum," described above. However, leading a threaded discussion is initiated by the instructor and more directly moderated, directing the messages in the threads toward specific learning objectives. This kind of interaction is effective because it directly links the subject matter of the class with the individual students in the class. Usually there are time limits to these discussions so the responses should be timely and regular within those time constraints as identified by the individual instructor.
- **Creating and Moderating Virtual Small Groups:** Instructors can intentionally create virtual small groups in an online class. Once these groups are created, the instructor moderates the work and the discussions among students. This type of interaction combines the general communal elements of "Moderating a Discussion Forum" or "Leading Threaded Discussions" (both described above) in a small-group setting where mutual interdependence can be fostered. Thus the contact is effective in creating a sense of social cohesiveness and community within

which a deeper understanding of the subject matter can occur. Usually there are time limits and deadlines for group work, so the presence of the instructor should be timely and regular within those time constraints.

- **Feedback on Student Work:** Instructors are responsible for verifying the participation of students and giving them feedback on their performance on assignments. This type of contact is effective and substantive because it provides opportunities for students to adjust their performance and their understanding (or misunderstanding) of the material. As in a face-to-face class, this contact is crucial to the learning process. The timing of this feedback is at the discretion of the instructor, and it depends on the type of learning being achieved, but timely appropriate feedback is essential. Computer-generated exams typically provide immediate feedback, but feedback on written work takes time.   Students should be made aware of the parameters of the feedback, which can consist of written, audio, or video material.

- **Posting Prepared Instructional Material:** In a face-to-face class, much of the contact between instructors and students consists of the instructor presenting material to the class in the form of lectures and handouts or other instructor-prepared materials. In an online class, this is also a mode of effective contact between the instructor and the student. These materials, combined with publisher-produced material or material found on the Internet, create the functional equivalent of the content of the class. The timing of posting these materials depends on the schedule of the course and should be regular within the parameters of the rhythm of the course.

- **Facilitating Student-to-Student Contact:** Instructors may facilitate conversations between students. This contact can be synchronous or asynchronous, face-to-face or mediated through technology, individual or group, and highly moderated or lightly moderated. In this case, instead of the regular effective contact occurring between instructor and student it involves interaction between learners. As with face-to-face classes, this type of communication is very effective in providing opportunities for collaborative learning among students. The timing of this interaction depends on the schedule of the course and should be regular within the parameters of the rhythm of the course.

Frequency of Regular Effective Contact

DE Courses are considered the "virtual equivalent" of face-to-face courses. Therefore, the frequency of contact will be at least the same as it would be in an equivalent face-to-face course.   At the very least, the number of instructor contact hours per week available for face-to-face students will also be available in asynchronous and/or synchronous mode with students in the DE format. Contact shall be distributed in a manner that ensures that regular contact is maintained over the course of a week and should occur as often as appropriate for the course.