1. Why should we treat distance education (DE) any differently than our other classes?

Rightly or wrongly, our accreditors (ACCJC) ask us to. California regulations (Title 5) also contain distance education-specific rules and policies.

2. Is there really that much to it?

Quite a bit, actually. In fact, ACCJC devotes an entire document to the subject: The Guide to Evaluating Distance Education and Correspondence Education as well as portions of the Substantive Change Manual. The California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office publishes the Distance Education Guidelines.

3. I'm not going to click those links and read all that. Just tell me, why all this special treatment for DE?

Some of it traces back to federal regulations from the Department of Education. Some can be ascribed to the (unfair) bias in academia that views online education as inherently inferior and more susceptible to abuses. Some is based on trying to reduce the likelihood of recurrences of bad behavior such as financial aid fraud scams or the unscrupulous activities of a few for-profit online education institutions.

4. Ok, so give me some specifics. What are some areas where we are supposed to be doing things differently for DE?

The biggest area is probably "regular effective contact" (Title 5) / "regular substantive interaction" (ACCJC). This concept is applied only to distance education and we are required to have a policy that defines our institutional expectations of faculty teaching DE classes regarding how and how often they are to interact with their students.

Related to this, there is an expectation that the institution has a policy on satisfactory progress for DE courses and programs. Also, "last day of attendance" is documented differently for DE - rather than simply noting whether students are showing up, online "attendance" is being interpreted as academic activity of the student.

5. Is that it?

Hardly. There are also areas where the institution is explicitly expected to make sure that services and opportunities available on campus are also available to students at a distance, and that we are specifically evaluating how well we are serving online students.

We are expected to provide student services to online students. Our systems used in online education are supposed to help assure student identity while maintaining student privacy. And all

of our online systems and instructional materials should be accessible to people with disabilities.

We are expected to disaggregate outcomes data for students in online classes and compare that to campus-based class data. At the institutional level we are supposed to be conducting broad analysis of how well the institution is serving online students. Online education should be explicitly addressed in our program review processes.

As we add new online courses and programs, we need to be able to articulate a clear justification of the need, alignment of the new approach with MiraCosta's mission and goals, a plan to assess progress, and support required to make success as likely as possible.

6. Anything else?

Oh, yes. There are legal issues which are magnified in online education such as accessibility, copyright and fair use, intellectual property, and, at the institutional level, authorization required from other states to offer distance education to their residents.

Areas that accreditors look at, but for which the standards are not completely clear, also abound. These include things like faculty preparation to teach online, evaluation of online courses and faculty, orientation and support for online faculty and students, and promotion/assurance of academic integrity in distance education.

7. Wow.

I know.