



Information and FAQs about the *21st Century Distance Education Guidelines* April 6, 2021

The Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC) has posted *21st Century Distance Education Guidelines* [on its website](#) along with its statement about them.

Key Information for SARA Purposes

- Adherence to C-RAC's *2011 Interregional Guidelines for the Evaluation of Distance Education* is a requirement for institutions to participate in SARA.
- NC-SARA commissioned NCHEMS to undertake a review of accreditors' use of the *2011 C-RAC Guidelines* and then, based on the findings of that review, to develop the *21st Century Distance Education Guidelines* in service to the field and accreditors. The guidelines are not NC-SARA's; NC-SARA will post the guidelines on its website upon NC-SARA board's approval to incorporate them into the *SARA Policy Manual*.
- The *21st Century Guidelines* are not in draft form; they were finalized by NCHEMS along with the numerous expert participants in the project. NC-SARA "proposed" them to C-RAC for its consideration of acceptance. C-RAC, with its statement on its website, has indicated its support for them. C-RAC has informed NC-SARA that C-RAC has retired the *2011 C-RAC Guidelines*.
- Given C-RAC's acceptance of the guidelines, the NC-SARA board now needs to vote to replace language that references the *2011 C-RAC Guidelines* in the *SARA Policy Manual*. This vote will take place in the May NC-SARA board meeting.
- NC-SARA staff will be recommending an implementation / transition period for SARA institutions and states needing to use these guidelines for the review of SARA institutions. During April, through compacts', states', and institutions' input, we will determine an appropriate transition timeline to recommend to the NC-SARA board.
 - SARA institutions may directly contribute their preference of the implementation timeline through a brief survey that will be emailed.
 - Regional compacts will be seeking input from states in their respective regions to gather this information.

- Until the implementation / transition period is complete, the *SARA Policy Manual* and SARA administrative forms will reference both the *2011 C-RAC Guidelines* and the *21st Century Guidelines*.

NC-SARA will share details of the implementation and transition plan after its May board meeting.

General FAQs about the 21st Century Distance Education Guidelines

What are the *21st Century Distance Education Guidelines*?

The *21st Century Distance Education Guidelines* are designed to help support accreditors' reviews of distance education programs. They are not accreditation standards; instead, they are a collection of elements designed to inform, but not limit, accreditors and states in their judgment of satisfactory levels of quality in the offering of programs through distance education.

The guidelines are organized into six categories:

1. **Institutional Capacity** addresses institutional investments in student supports, technology, professional development, and online program management (OPM).
2. **Institutional Transparency and Disclosures** outlines information that institutions should be proactively prepared to provide students.
3. **Academic Programs** addresses academic quality expectations, including the collection and use of meaningful assessment data for program improvement.
4. **Support for Students** details effective practices to engage and assist distance education students.
5. **Program Review** describes expectations for the regular review of programs, including feedback from a variety of stakeholders as well as graduate success measures.
6. **Academic and Instructional Integrity**, which addresses ensuring adequate oversight and accountability.

What is the difference between these guidelines and accreditors' standards?

These guidelines are not accreditation standards; instead, accreditors may use them to inform their standards and/or processes for the review of distance education. It is important to note that the previous *2011 C-RAC Guidelines* were also guidelines and not accreditation standards. As C-RAC's statement confirms, "*Each Commission within C-RAC has adopted its own standards, policies, and procedures for evaluating distance education delivered by their institutional members and will independently determine how to use the new Guidelines.*"

Adherence to the guidelines is a requirement for institutions to participate in SARA.

Why do we need *21st Century Distance Education Guidelines*?

Guidelines previously developed by the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC) have been the primary source of quality assurance for distance education since 2001. Adherence to the guidelines is a requirement for institutions to participate in SARA. The guidelines were last updated in 2011, yet institutions' and accreditors' practices around distance education quality have been continually and rapidly evolving.

Given the numerous advancements in technology, learning sciences, competency-based programs, and distance learning pedagogy, along with the increase in distance education programs, the need for high quality credentials, and the economic realities facing families and states, distance education leaders, accreditors, and NC-SARA believed that it was time for a new set of guidelines. NC-SARA assumed a leadership role in supporting the development of this proposed new set of guidelines for institutional accreditors reviewing distance education.

Who was involved in creating the *21st Century Distance Education Guidelines*?

NC-SARA commissioned the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) to develop the guidelines, which were crafted with input from a wide array of postsecondary distance education experts, as well as accreditors, university presidents, and higher education association leaders. The extensive list of expert participants is listed in Appendix A.

When do SARA states and institutions need to start using the *21st Century Guidelines*?

NC-SARA and its regional compact partners are researching what it will take for states and institutions to implement the use of these guidelines. NC-SARA staff will use this insight to propose an implementation timeline to the NC-SARA board in its May meeting.

Where do I go for additional information?

NC-SARA will be sharing more information about the implementation timeline, resources to help states and institutions, and process details after the May NC-SARA board meeting. For additional questions, you may contact info@nc-sara.org