



National Council for
State Authorization
Reciprocity Agreements

UPDATED Information and FAQs about the *21st Century Distance Education Guidelines*

UPDATED June 1, 2021

The Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC) has posted *21st Century Distance Education Guidelines* for accreditors [on its website](#) along with its statement about them, and has retired the *2011 Interregional Guidelines for the Evaluation of Distance Education*.

Updated Information

NC-SARA's previous set of *Information and FAQs* published on April 6, 2021 is shared below, starting on page 4.

HISTORY AND CONTEXT: SARA AND THE C-RAC GUIDELINES

When SARA was first formed, the *2011 Interregional Guidelines for the Evaluation of Distance Education* were the primary guidelines for quality distance education as no other national standards existed. States wanted assurances, through their SARA membership, that they would have the leverage afforded by the *2011 C-RAC Guidelines* to investigate participating institutions that might be in violation of SARA policy, and/or to work with institutions' accreditors to support quality assurance. Therefore, the *2011 C-RAC Guidelines* became an important aspect of SARA – in policy and process – for helping assure student consumer protections for SARA state members.

Since SARA's inception, SARA State Portal Entity staff have used the *2011 C-RAC Guidelines* to request assurance from participating institutions that they will abide by the *Guidelines* to ensure distance education quality. Then, as now, there is an expectation that the new *21st Century Guidelines* will serve the same purpose, should the NC-SARA Board approve their use in SARA policy.

ACCREDITORS' USE OF THE C-RAC GUIDELINES

Neither the *2011 C-RAC Guidelines* nor the *21st Century Guidelines* are accreditation standards; each accreditor addresses the review of distance education through their own accreditation processes and standards. However, the *2011 C-RAC Guidelines*, and now the *21st Century Guidelines*, function as a point of reference for accreditors.

To date, the *21st Century Guidelines* have been formally adopted by two of C-RAC's accrediting commissions since C-RAC retired the *2011 Guidelines* and adopted the *21st Century Guidelines*.

- [NWCCUs Distance Education Policy](#) was revised and adopted by its Commission in April 2021.
- [NECHE's Guidelines for Preparing Substantive Change Reports on the Establishment of Academic Programming Offered Through Distance Education](#) and their statement on the [21st Century Distance Education Guidelines](#) was posted in May 2021, asking that "institutions now use these instead of the C-RAC Guidelines in their reports."

NC-SARA will continue to share with its member states and participating institutions the ways in which accreditors plan to incorporate the *21st Century Guidelines* into their accreditation processes and reviews of distance education.

C-RAC GUIDELINES AND SARA POLICY

The C-RAC Guidelines are an important element of SARA's suite of consumer protection policies. Specifically, per Section 4.7 of the [SARA Policy Manual](#), "Incorporation and use of C-RAC Guidelines," the following language about the *2011 C-RAC Guidelines* is currently in place:

"Consumer protection within SARA, in addition to dealing with alleged fraudulent activity, also provides for the investigation and resolution of Complaints that an Institution is operating a course or program contrary to practices set forth in the C-RAC Guidelines in such a way that a student is harmed. (The Interregional Guidelines for the Evaluation of Distance Education [Online Learning] are referred to as "C-RAC Guidelines" in this document). C-RAC Guidelines adopted by the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions are incorporated in the requirements of SARA as policies. States that join SARA need to base their oversight of SARA activity and their investigative actions on the following expectations. C-RAC provisions. The president or chief academic officer of each Institution participating in SARA (whether Accredited by a "regional" or other recognized accreditor) shall attest that their Institution meets and agrees to comply with the following ... [list of *2011 C-RAC Guidelines*] ...

The State agrees to require each SARA applicant Institution to apply for Home State approval using the standard SARA institutional application, including the Institution's agreement to operate under the *C-RAC Guidelines*."

STATE PORTAL ENTITIES AND THE C-RAC GUIDELINES

SARA State Portal Entities (SPEs) have the authority to review whether institutions are abiding by the *Guidelines* when issues arise concerning quality. Should a concern about an institution in a SARA member state come about, SPEs may refer to the *Guidelines* to investigate complaints or claims that the institution does not meet the *Guidelines*, or as a basis to engage in conversation with an institution's accreditor about the institution's accreditation status.

As detailed in the *SARA Policy Manual* related to the Application:

"EXPLANATORY NOTES (Functional Responsibilities of SARA States)

N1 - Can a SARA State Portal Entity (SPE) require a SARA applicant Institution to provide additional evidence that it will meet policies for operating under SARA before allowing it to participate in SARA?

No. A state must accept an institution's self-certification that it will meet the policies set forth in the *SARA Policy Manual* and commitments contained in the institutional application to participate in SARA once it is allowed to participate. However, as soon as an institution is accepted into SARA, the State Portal Entity has a right to evaluate whether the institution in its work through SARA meets the C-RAC *Guidelines* or other SARA requirements and must investigate any claims that the Institution does not meet these requirements."

INSTITUTIONS AND THE C-RAC GUIDELINES

On the SARA Application and Approval Form for Institutional Participation, the institution agrees to abide by the *C-RAC Guidelines*. Per SARA Policy, "The president or chief academic officer of each Institution participating in SARA (whether Accredited by a "regional" or other recognized accreditor) shall attest that their Institution meets and agrees to comply with" the Guidelines. Institutions may be asked by states to share documentation or evidence of how they meet the *Guidelines* after initial approval to participate in SARA.

Institutions are encouraged to directly or indirectly reference the *Guidelines* in their own internal quality assurance processes for distance education, including in their processes for:

- Accreditation documentation
- Program review of existing distance education programs
- New program development
- Faculty development
- Partnership agreements

CROSSWALKS: From the 2011 C-RAC Guidelines to the 21st Century Guidelines

Because each accreditor may incorporate the *21st Century Guidelines* into their accreditation policies and practices differently, NC-SARA will not be providing a crosswalk between the *2011 C-RAC Guidelines* and the *21st Century Distance Education Guidelines*. However, some accreditors may provide such a resource to their members in regard to their own policies and practices, so we recommend that institutions stay in touch with their accreditors for such potential resources.

NC-SARA RESOURCES & IMPLEMENTATION

NC-SARA will continue to provide information about the *21st Century Guidelines* as related to SARA policy to its state members and participating institutions, and will continue to discuss these new *Guidelines* with accreditors to seek information about their expected use. We are planning several educational programs about the *21st Century Guidelines* as part of the implementation timeline as well, which still needs to be voted upon by the NC-SARA Board. The first webinar will be June 29, 2021 – you may register [HERE](#). This webinar will be recorded and shared on the NC-SARA website.

Previously Shared 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