D20. Distance Education

The university provides needed support for the program, including administrative, communication, information technology and student services.

There is an ongoing effort to evaluate the academic effectiveness of the format, to assess learning methods and to systematically use this information to stimulate program improvements. Evaluation of student outcomes and of the learning model are especially important in institutions that offer distance learning but do not offer a comparable in-residence program.

1) Identify all public health distance education degree programs and/or concentrations that offer a curriculum or course of study that can be obtained via distance education. Template Intro1 may be referenced for this purpose.

As listed in Table Intro-1, PHHP offers two public health distance education programs. These are the Master of Science in Biostatistics program and the Master of Public Health (Public Health Practice and Social and Behavioral Sciences concentrations).

2) Describe the public health distance education programs, including

1) an explanation of the model or methods used,

All online degree programs have the same UF admissions, curricular and graduation requirements as campus programs.

Master of Science in Biostatistics

- The Department of Biostatistics offers an online version of their 36-credit MS program. The courses in the program are offered through the Canvas Learning Management System and content is provided primarily through asynchronous lecture videos. Homework assignments and exams are similar or identical to those provided to the campus equivalents of these courses. The capstone experience for the online MS in Biostatistics has the same requirements as that for the campus MS in Biostatistics.

Master of Public Health (Public Health Practice and Social and Behavioral Sciences)

- The Master of Public Health program offers two MPH concentrations through distance learning; the MPH in Social and Behavioral Sciences and the MPH in Public Health Practice. All MPH distance learning courses are offered through asynchronous lecture videos delivered through the Canvas Learning Management System. Students in the online MPH program complete APE and ILE experiences in the same manner as students in the campus MPH program.

2) the school's rationale for offering these programs,

MS in Biostatistics

- The online MS in Biostatistics program was created to meet the continued growth in demand for trained biostatisticians as the world becomes more dependent on predictive data and numerical reasoning. Research revealed that despite the growth in demand for biostatisticians, there were no existing online programs in the U.S. that offered a master's degree in biostatistics. This program was created primarily to meet this demand and provide working professionals a more flexible opportunity to earn their degree.

MPH

- The online MPH program was developed to provide public health academic training to working professionals in health-related fields, such as physicians, nurses, veterinarians and dentists, as well as public health workers who have no formal public health
training. The decision to launch the program was made after results from market surveys conducted in 2004 and 2009 revealed a need and demand for such an offering.

3) the manner in which it provides necessary administrative, information technology and student support services,

Students in online programs in the college benefit from a dedicated Instructional Design team, including two instructional designers and two multimedia specialists. An in-house recording studio allows instructors to create dedicated online videos to best maximize electronic delivery of content. In addition, online students utilize the same learning management system as campus students and have access to the same student support services as campus students, including:

- E-learning @ UF resources, including the Help Desk, which is available by email and phone 24 hours per day, seven days per week, for technical support issues.
- Online Library Help Desk, which provides access to electronic library resources, including online journals and e-books. Students can consult with the college’s dedicated Health Science Center librarian.
- UF Counseling and Wellness Center, which provides online counseling and access to online workshops in a variety of topical areas to help improve the mental health and academic success of students.
- Disability Resource Center, which provides academic accommodation, accessibility consulting and education on disability inclusion.

MS in Biostatistics

- Students enrolled in the online MS program are afforded all of the same administrative, IT and student support services as campus students, including access to departmental academic assistants, faculty advisors, college-level IT support services and UF wellness services.

MPH

- The director and associate director of the MPH program provide student academic counseling and monitor overall student academic progress. There is also a faculty-level concentration coordinator for both online MPH concentrations. Students have a plan of study and are assigned a faculty advisor as they are developing plans for their APE and ILE. Faculty advisors are usually selected by the MPH program director based on similarities of interests and skills, but students may request a specific faculty advisor. Course instructors and teaching assistants monitor student progress within specific courses. Strong technical support is also provided through a staff of departmental employees and the UF Help Desk.

4) the manner in which it monitors the academic rigor of the programs and their equivalence (or comparability) to other degree programs offered by the university, and

For both programs, instructors of online courses are drawn from the primary faculty and affiliated faculty in the respective areas of study, most of whom also teach in the campus programs. Affiliated faculty are selected because of their expertise and practice experience in the content of their courses. Most online courses utilize the same teaching resources, such as books and guest lecturers, used in campus courses. The college has a Teaching Excellence program that offers training modules to faculty on several topics, including educational technology.

5) the manner in which it evaluates the educational outcomes, as well as the format and methods.
MS in Biostatistics
- Students in the online MS in Biostatistics program are assessed on their progress toward the Student Learning Outcomes consisting of knowledge, skills and professional behavior that are critical to a biostatistician. These outcomes are evaluated by faculty course instructors and the student's academic advisor through homework assignments, course projects and exams, and their capstone project. All students are encouraged to complete course evaluations each semester. These evaluations are compiled and reviewed by the chair of the department. If a deficiency in course quality is noted, the chair works with the online MS program director to address the issue. They may also consult with one of the college’s instructional designers. Finally, students exiting the online MS program complete a program survey, and feedback is reviewed by the online MS program director for future development plans.

MPH
- Students in the distance MPH program are assessed on their attainment of foundational competencies by their internship preceptor, as are students in the campus program. These assessments are reviewed to note any reported deficiencies in either delivery mode of the program. In addition, both campus and online students may opt to take the Certification in Public Health exam. The MPH program director reviews the exam results to assess the overall pass rate as well as to look for any potential area of concern in the outcomes. To date, all, with the exception of one distance student, have passed the exam. Finally, all students are encouraged to complete course evaluations each semester. These evaluations are compiled and reviewed by the MPH program director and the chair of the department that offers the course. If a potential deficiency is noted in course quality, then the faculty member teaching that course is referred to the instructional design team for advice and assistance on improving the course.

3) Describe the processes that the university uses to verify that the student who registers in a distance education course (as part of a distance-based degree) or a fully distance-based degree is the same student who participates in and completes the course or degree and receives the academic credit.

Students in distance programs use UF logins and passwords to access the learning management system where they submit assignments and take exams. The university has a designated online proctoring system called Honorlock that is utilized for any exams and quizzes that count 15% or more toward the final course grade. Honorlock proctors check the student’s government issued photo ID or student ID prior to the exam or quiz to ensure that the registered student is taking the assessment.

4) If applicable, assess strengths and weaknesses related to this criterion and plans for improvement in this area.

Strengths:
- The college has been offering online learning opportunities for more than a decade, and faculty and staff in the college have extensive experience in creating and delivering online courses, with support from a dedicated instructional design team.
- An initiative to convert campus courses to blended or flipped classroom courses began in 2013 and has led to most faculty delivering some course content electronically to allow for more engaging in-person experiences. A benefit of this initiative is that the majority of faculty have created online lectures and other electronic content that can be used in both campus and online courses. When UF required that all course content be delivered electronically in
March of 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the faculty’s level of comfort and experience with online course delivery techniques and best practices, in addition to the work that had already been done to move content online, made for a smooth transition.

- The college offers multiple resources to support distance learning, including the college’s in-house instructional design team and recording studio.

Weaknesses:
- None identified