Best Practices for Distance Education

Mat-Su College is adopting the practice of instructors reviewing this checklist prior to delivering online courses each semester. Department coordinators are to receive written acknowledgement confirming review by instructors before new online courses are added to the schedule. This checklist provides best practices for online courses to give guidance to instructors and to ensure student success.

Distance education mentors are available to help with this checklist or for help with online course development and teaching in general (see end of document).

This checklist is a slightly modified version of the Course Design Checklist made by Academic Innovations & eLearning at the University of Alaska Anchorage and released under a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA license. We release our derivative under the same license.

Course information:

- **Instructor name**:

- **Course title**:

- **Course number**:

Best practices checklist

1. Welcoming students to the course

1.1: Instructor welcomes students to the course with an email, Blackboard announcement, or similar, containing the following information:

- ☐ Instructor's contact info and contact policies
- ☐ Required first assignment and clear instructions for where to start the course
- ☐ Where to find course deadlines
- ☐ Explanation of withdrawal deadlines
- ☐ Information on course prerequisites

1.2: Instructor provides clear directions for getting started. Instructions include course navigation, introduction, and any assignments or resources required for the first day of class.

1.2: Regularly scheduled office hours are available (phone, audio/web conference, IM, etc).

1.3: Instructor provides brief biographic information and photo/video to establish presence as instructor.

2. Syllabus best practices

2.1: Syllabus includes description of course:

- ☐ course title, number, credits, prerequisites, times
- ☐ instructor name, office hours, phone, email
- ☐ student learning outcomes from Course Content Guide
- ☐ course goals
- ☐ course description
- ☐ description of instructional methods
- ☐ complete list of course materials
- ☐ pacing expectations
- ☐ schedule of class topics and assignments

2.2: Syllabus includes policies:

- ☐ instructor response times
- ☐ grading turnaround time
- ☐ instructions on checking grades
- ☐ policies on grades, incomplete, and instructor-initiated withdrawal
- ☐ course policies, including participation and late work
- ☐ address plagiarism and academic integrity for course

- proficiencies required for course

- evaluation criteria

- expectations for student participation

- etiquette/netiquette for communication with peers

- add/drop date

2.3: Syllabus includes student support information:

- Information on student support services

- Information on disability services

- List of technical requirements (e.g., connection speed, software needed) and a list of expected technical competencies (e.g., email, word-processing)

- Instructions for students who have technology trouble

2.4: Course calendar or assignment due dates are available in a location in addition to the syllabus (e.g., repeated in lesson folders or as a separate document in Blackboard)

3. Course content

3.1: An explanation of course navigation and arrangement is available to students.

3.2: Learning outcomes for the course are available and clear.

3.3: Each lesson or module provides:

- learning objectives

- introduction to the materials

- clear directions

- learning activities

☐ instructor insights (e.g., lecture notes or material)

☐ clearly defined assignments

3.4: Making contact assignment (i.e., an assignment due in the first week, such as a mandatory introduction post)

3.5: First content-based assignment due within two weeks prior to add/drop date.

3.6: Lecture materials are sequenced and "chunked" to improve usability.

3.7: All web links are currently functioning.

3.8: Material has been checked for spelling and grammar.

3.9: Course materials reviewed for accessibility for students with disabilities (e.g., videos contain captions or transcripts).

3.10: Instructor connects course content to the student's current and/or future context (e.g., cultural context, career paths).

3.11: Additional resources are available for students who want more information.

4. Interaction and collaboration

4.1: Explanation of how feedback on assignments will be given to students.

4.2: Identify the collaboration methods used in this course:

☐ discussion

- ☐ chat
- ☐ student presentation
- ☐ peer evaluation
- ☐ role playing
- ☐ web conferencing
- ☐ email
- ☐ blog
- ☐ wiki
- ☐ other

4.3: Explicit instructions for using communications (e.g., discussion boards) are provided (e.g., screen shots or a link to help).

4.4: An open collaboration area for students is provided (e.g., a Blackboard Collaborate room or a discussion board).

4.5: Students are introduced to the larger professional or learning community in the field.

4.6: Group projects/activities are assigned to encourage peer-to-peer interaction and teamwork.

5. Assessment.

5.1: A mechanism is in place for instructor to provide specific, detailed feedback to students on each assessment.

5.2: Students are periodically informed of their grades (e.g., by way of an online gradebook).

5.3: Exams correspond with the stated learning objectives for the course. (Not all courses use exams for assessment. If exams will be used, they must match course content and goals.)

5.4: Students are given varied opportunities for reflection, such as:

- ☐ student's own learning experience
- ☐ real world relevance and application
- ☐ meta-reflection on the course itself: learning materials, strategies, and structure.

5.5: Cultural and contextual considerations are woven into assignments when appropriate.

5.6: Assignments vary in performance types. Example: Create, publish, present, etc.

5.7: Assignments encourage critical thinking and problem solving (analyze, adapt, apply, and evaluate).

5.8: A student self- and/or peer-review is included in graded assessments.

5.9: Assessments give students the opportunity to demonstrate real world applications of knowledge and skills (e.g., role-playing, modeling, etc.).

5.10: Assignment expectations are clearly communicated including deliverables, due dates, and instructions for submission.

6. Technical support considerations

6.1: Instructions for technical support are provided to the students (e.g., UAA IT Call Center information, Blackboard video tutorials, etc.).

6.2: Required tools such as plug-ins and players are clearly defined and links are provided for acquiring those tools.

6.3: All technologies to be used in the course are tested with students in the first week to ensure that the students have the technology resources to complete the course.

6.4: A technology outage plan or "Plan B" is included with explicit instructions.

6.5: A mechanism is in place for instructor to identify and contact students who are falling behind (e.g., Blackboard Performance Dashboard or Blackboard Retention Center).

7. Space for additional comments

Distance education mentors

The following people serve as a distance education mentors.

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