New Jersey Virtual Community College Consortium

Best Practice Guidelines for Distance Learning Faculty

Distance learning courses must meet the same academic standards for quality of instruction, academic rigor, and educational effectiveness as courses provided in the more traditional classroom format. To ensure the design of quality courses, the following best practice guidelines have been developed and endorsed by the NJVCCC to assist faculty in the development of quality online courses.

1. Whole course should be completed before day one of the semester.

- A "completed" course allows faculty to concentrate on teaching and managing the course and communicating with students, rather than trying to plan, create, and test the next module.
- Students need to get a sense of the course as a whole. Because they cannot get immediate feedback to questions they need to be able to clearly understand what will be required of them so that they can plan their online activities.
- The pre-designed course materials are the flexible "shell" to which items can be added to accommodate student interests, current events, new materials, etc.
    - The whole course does not need to be displayed to the students on day one; it can be released in modules or segments.

2. Advance Information

- Students should be given advance information about course requirements and equipment needs for succeeding in the online course prior to registration. Examples of generic information include: description of online learning, self-assessment to determine if the student is suited to taking an online course, appropriate hardware and software, registration and log on information.
- Course specific information should also be communicated to students. Examples of course specific information include: brief biography about the instructor, how the course is structured, how the student will be graded, and course specific hardware or software.

3. Course Orientation

- Provide students with a thorough orientation to reduce uncertainties, provide clear guidelines for success, clarify expected performance and behavior patterns. This takes some time, which should be built into the course schedule in some way. For example, Virtual Courses could begin one week earlier to allow an orientation week, or the first half of the first week could be dedicated to orientation.
- Provide students with an overall picture of what the course is going to be like, how the course works, and what is expected of students.
- Ensure that students have a functional level of familiarity with any tools or media that are being considered, or build into the program the necessary training and practice required to gain a

functional competence with the selected media and tools. This includes providing students with opportunities to practice the technologies needed to interact with other students and the instructor.
- Describe the process for accessing technical assistance.
- Review the course outline: Review readings and materials; describe all course learning activities, assignments, and exams. Specify precise expectations (ex. Be online a minimum of three times a week; post at least N items in class discussion each week; penalties for plagiarism late work.)
- Give instructions for the first activity/assignment.
- Include links to the institution's Academic Integrity Policy, Network Acceptable Use Policy, and Academic and Student Support Services such as counseling, academic advising, tutoring, library resources, and grades.

4. Instructional design

- Modularize the course into manageable segments. For each module, create a variety of materials such as Web-based and other fixed lecture type materials collaborative activities, student assessment activities, and questions for discussion or response in each module.
- Include communications component; examples include email, threaded discussion, chat, phone, face to face appointments. Close personal interaction should be maintained among students and between teachers and students through electronic means.
    - Establish appropriate communication patterns and guidelines, including sensitivity to diverse student backgrounds, receptivity to alternative ideas, and netiquette.
    - Design a 'social space" distinct from other communication channels that encourages student discussion without oversight by the instructor.
- Tell students when you plan to be online working on their courses (example: Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, and Sunday) and plan to respond/acknowledge email within 48 hours.
- Secure the required copyright clearances and licenses for a networked environment to provide all learners with access to necessary resources.
- Employ communication strategies to provide the opportunity for group collaboration and cooperative learning. Online discussion tools supports the implementation of current learning theory (active learning, student-centered learning, and a learner-controlled environment), rather than the passive dissemination of information.
- Convert graphics and other display materials to appropriate formats for the distance learning technologies being employed.
- Select multimedia that support the goals and objectives of the course. Carefully consider bandwidth when incorporating multimedia. Video media should also be burned to a CD and made available to students who prefer that. Bandwidth issues are a significant barrier, so CD backup is essential
- Consider disabilities when designing course Web pages. For example, include alternative text information for graphical formats and make sure backgrounds provide enough contrast and clarity. Use a Web accessibility testing tool such Bobby < http://bobby.watchfire.com/bobby/html/enlindex.osp> to expose and repair barriers to accessibility.

5. Course outcomes (goals and objectives)

- Outcomes should specifically identify the behaviors the successful students will be able t perform upon completion of the course.
- Course requirements include clearly stated expectations defining minimal levels of student participation.

- Where possible, the learning outcomes should relate to real-life experiences through examples and application.

6. Course Assignments / Student Assessments

- Course assignments are clearly communicated.
- Web-based assignments clearly state how the Web may be used in completing the assignment.
- Web-based assignments direct students to specific Web sites to use or avoid and/or provide hints for searching the Web.
- Web-based assignments require students to evaluate and validate Web-based information.
- Course assignments and projects require students to make appropriate and effective use of external resources, including print, library, Web-based, and other electronic resources.
- Course assignments, projects and content facilitate collaborative activities among students.
- Student assessments utilize built-in features where appropriate.
- Quizzes and testing are tied to the course objectives.
- Students have ample opportunity for self-assessment.
- Assessment should be directly tied to objectives/goals.

7. Course Resources: (Whenever possible, individual course sites should provide students with direct access to the following online resources):

- Smarthinking or some other online tutoring service :
- The college's tutoring center
- The host college's and the NJVCCC's bookstore
- The free learning resource center that comes with many textbooks :
- The college's writing lab
- The college's library and VALE :
- The college's help desk