

Best Practices for Online Education

Distance Education Committee Recommendation: April 12, 2013

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While there are several forms of distance education at Rogers State University, by far the most common one is the class conducted exclusively online. The best practices in this document are intended only for such classes. Some of them might be applicable to “blended” classes that include an online component, but the needs of such classes are not explicitly addressed here.

“Best practices” are recommended practices, not strict requirements. Their exact application may vary with the course content, the instructor, and the educational level of the students. The implementation of best practices is best left to academic departments, which have the primary responsibility for developing and evaluating courses, as well as for assigning instructors to classes and evaluating their effectiveness in teaching.

Best practices are presented for three key areas: (1) recruitment and training of online instructors; (2) design, development and review of online classes; and (3) teaching online classes. In each area, the concern is with the specific issues involved in online education. University and departmental policies on such matters as hiring and evaluating faculty, designing academic programs, assessing learning, and academic integrity are assumed; they apply to online classes just as they do to all other kinds of classes.

1. RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING OF FACULTY

Ideally all online instructors would receive training in distance education and an orientation to RSU’s e-campus system before teaching any class. When this is not possible (as with newly hired full-time faculty or with adjuncts assigned to new sections needed to meet high enrollments), such training and orientation should be completed as quickly as possible. The introduction and orientation should be included in new faculty orientation. The responsibility for implementing best practices in this area rests with the Department Head.

The Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) will provide the following modules.

A. Introduction to Online Teaching. This module will introduce the special demands and dynamics of the online teaching environment. It will cover basic items such as effective course design; syllabus and assignment construction; grading; and communication and interaction between instructor and students and among students within the class.

B. Orientation to e-campus. This module will explain the basics of the system such as logging on, uploading and organizing content, grading, and communication. The training will also address issues of confidentiality of student records, academic integrity, and exam security. When there is a significant change in e-campus, such as the adoption of a new platform, all full-time and adjunct instructors should complete this orientation at their earliest convenience.

2. DESIGN, DEVELOPMENT AND REVIEW OF ONLINE CLASSES

The educational goals of an online class are assumed to be the same as they would be for a class taught in another environment. But the online environment requires special attention to organization, design, interaction and communication. Moreover, an online class differs in one way from an on-ground class: it is not only a process; it is also a product. Once a class is placed online, it is possible, at least in principle, for many instructors to utilize some or all of its features. The development of an online class should be undertaken with the needs of future instructors as well as students in mind. While future instructors may modify various aspects of the class, it should be well organized, carefully conceived, and largely “ready to go” when they are assigned to teach it. The design should be as “platform-independent” as possible so that a change in platform does not require major changes in the class.

The responsibility for developing classes that meet these requirements rests with the department faculty. The CTL is responsible for providing assistance in design and development. If a particular online class is frequently taught by adjunct instructors, it is recommended that at least one full-time faculty member take overall responsibility for design and development of it. The CTL should maintain a permanent copy of the course.

The principles stated below should guide course design and development.

A. Clarity and Lack of Clutter.

Each page, beginning with home page, has a clear and simple layout. It is easy to see what is there and what the significance of each item is.

There is consistency across units. Every unit, as far as possible, should be organized in the same way so that students (and new instructors) quickly become “at home” in the class.

B. Easy Access to Key Information: Syllabus

Every online course must include an up-to-date course syllabus, containing the same information as any other course syllabus. Please see Section 3.6.3.4.2 of the Academic Policies and Procedures Manual for a list of required information.

C. Calendar and/or Schedule of Assignments

D. Communication and Interaction

The course contains a clear and user-friendly system for instructor-student interaction.

The course provides a clear and user-friendly system for student-student interaction, utilizing such devices as discussions, forums, group projects, peer review, etc.

E. Structured Learning

Course materials organized in a clear logical manner.

Course objectives are used to develop appropriate learning objectives for assignments.

There is a clear and coherent sequence of assignments and assessments.

There is provision for regular, structured feedback from instructor to students in order to facilitate learning.

Multimedia elements and/or learning objects directly relevant to student learning are included as appropriate.

Library access is provided as appropriate for the class.

There are clear, easily accessible instructions for all assignments.

Opportunities for collaborative learning should be strongly considered for inclusion.

F. Review

Each online class should be reviewed, within the department, every three to five years according to the following criteria.

The class effectively addresses the current state of knowledge in the field.

The class incorporates up-to-date textbooks and other learning materials.

The class makes effective use of relevant current technology and software.

The class meets student learning needs, as identified by assessment, student evaluations, etc.

3. TEACHING ONLINE CLASSES

A. Response to Student Messages

The instructor should reply to student emails within 24 hours, except on holidays and weekends, and in case of extenuating circumstances. A reply may simply be an acknowledgement of the email, but ideally issues raised by the students' emails will be addressed in a timely fashion. (Please refer to the Academic Policies and Procedures Manual.)

B. Use of Online Learning System E-Mail Function

Rogers State University's online learning system e-mail function should be used for all online course-related student-faculty communications so as to minimize the chance of lost or missed messages.

C. Instructor Feedback

There is provision for regular, structured feedback from instructor to students in order to facilitate learning.

D. Faculty Availability

Instructors should be available to students in such ways as commenting on or guiding class discussions; offering students individual feedback on assignments; posting appropriate materials for student review; and encouraging student involvement with discussions and activities.

E. Syllabus and Assignment Schedule

A syllabus is required, and using a calendar of assignments is encouraged in order for students to pace their efforts.

F. Statement on Student Responsibility

Each department should develop a document for inclusion in all online class syllabi which explains that it is the student's responsibility to ensure that his/her equipment meets minimum standards for participating in an online class, and that students must also possess a sufficient level of computer proficiency to be able to access the current Rogers State University online learning system, download and upload assignments, and comply with all other course requirements.