Online and Hybrid Course Development Guidelines

February 10, 2011

The following is intended to serve as a guide to the development of online and hybrid courses at Cedar Crest College. Substantively, the recommendations have been developed on the basis of existing College policies, requirements established by federal and state law as well as best practices within the field of online education and distance learning. The check sheet included in this document was adapted from the Quality Online Course Initiative developed by the Illinois Online Network at the University of Illinois.

Given that academic quality -- regardless of delivery method or format -- is principally a faculty responsibility, the guidelines presented below are designed primarily to present information that will assist faculty and departments in the development of exceptional online and hybrid courses. Hence, while certain elements of this document are prescriptive, the fundamental purpose of the guidelines is to highlight the key issues that faculty should consider as they seek to promote student academic achievement through the use of online and hybrid courses.

Basic Definitions and Legal Requirements

1. **Online courses**: Courses in which instruction is conducted solely through the use of computer software in a virtual learning environment. For a course to be considered an online class, 100% of the content must be delivered online, although faculty may require on-site exams.

2. **Hybrid courses**: Courses that combine classroom-based face-to-face instruction with computer-based instruction in a virtual learning environment. To qualify as a hybrid course, 30%-70% of the course content must be delivered online.

3. **Contact Hour**: A contact hour is equal to one hour of scheduled instruction provided to students. State law requires that 14 contact hours be provided for each course credit hour. This requirement applies to online and hybrid courses as well as traditional courses. PDE regulations require institutions and instructors to demonstrate and document how their online and hybrid courses provide students with the functional equivalent of 42 contact hours in the case of a three credit course.

4. **Accessibility**: Federal law requires that online and hybrid courses must be capable of providing materials that are accessible to individuals with disabilities via college-supported assistive technology.

5. **Privacy**: Federal law requires that if personally identifiable student information is posted or communicated via an online or hybrid course, college-approved software applications must be utilized to protect the privacy rights of students.
General Institutional Principles and Commitments

1. **Mission**: Online and hybrid courses should be designed to serve the academic needs and interests of the various student populations which are central to the College’s mission.

2. **Suitability**: The nature and objectives of courses and academic programs should dictate whether it will be appropriate to utilize online and hybrid courses as a method of instruction.

3. **Pedagogical Diversity**: Online and hybrid courses constitute options that may be used to deliver academic content. Neither is to be regarded as a preferred or required method of instruction.

4. **Professional Development**: The College will support the development of online and hybrid courses by providing ongoing and predictable professional development opportunities and incentives for faculty and academic departments.

5. **Course Criteria**: Online and hybrid courses must be developed on the basis of clear and consistent standards, as reflected in the attached check sheet, which apply college-wide.

6. **Academic Standards**: Online and hybrid courses must reflect the same standards of academic integrity and rigor as classroom-based courses at the College.

7. **Course Syllabi**: The syllabi for online and hybrid courses must conform to the College’s syllabus policy as stated in Book IV of the Faculty Handbook.

8. **Course Approval Process**: Newly created online and hybrid courses are subject to the same course approval process which the College’s utilizes for traditional courses. An existing traditional course which is being transformed into either an online or hybrid course must be approved at the departmental level by a chair and/or program director; once approved, the appropriate faculty curriculum committee should be notified of the change. The attached list of best practices should be utilized as a guide to the approval of online and hybrid courses by both faculty committees and department chairs.

9. **Student Notification**: Class schedules and registration materials for students should clearly indicate which method of instruction will be utilized in a course (i.e. online, hybrid, traditional) and what technological requirements, if any, are required for the course.

10. **Infrastructural Support**: The College will provide instructors and students with the infrastructural resources and technical assistance needed to support both the synchronous and asynchronous features of online and hybrid courses.
11. **Assessment:** Online and hybrid courses are subject to the same student course evaluation and institutional assessment procedures which the College utilizes for traditional courses.

**Online, Hybrid and Traditional Courses**

College policy and state regulations require online and hybrid courses to be the functional equivalent of traditional courses when it comes to academic quality, student learning outcomes and contact hours. This also holds for accelerated courses, regardless of how they are delivered to students. Given that matters of academic integrity and student learning are best handled through the faculty governance system, the following addresses the issue of student contact hours from the perspective of both the Carnegie unit and the curricular credit policy enacted by PDE in 2008. The purpose of this discussion is to help faculty understand how online, hybrid and accelerated courses compare with traditional courses in regard to student contact hours and course credits.

1. **The Carnegie Unit**

   The Carnegie unit serves as the benchmark for awarding course credits to students. The basic formula is as follows:

   One credit is equal to 1 hour of class time plus 2 hours of homework.
   
   In the case of a lab, one credit is equal to 3 hours of class time without any homework.

   Hence, a 3-credit course should require 3 hours of class time per week along with 6 hours of homework. The Carnegie unit serves as the basis for PDE regulations regarding course credits.

2. **PA Curricular Credit Policy (22 Pa. Code Chapter 31, sec. 31.21-31.22)**

   The state requires 14 hours of class time for each course credit. Hence, the typical 3 credit course should require 42 hours of classroom instruction. This tally does not include final examinations administered after the end of classes.

   The regulations do not include any expectations or recommendations pertaining to homework. If we were to add this element to the state framework, however, students would be expected to complete 84 hours of homework for a 3-credit, 14 week course.

   Combining these elements, the minimum contact hour requirements and homework guidelines for both traditional and accelerated courses in Pennsylvania are as follows:

   **Class Time and Homework Hours per Week for Accelerated and Traditional 3-Credit Courses**

   14 Week Course = 3.00 Hours of Class Time and 6.0 Hours of Homework
3. Online Learning and the Equivalency Provision

State regulations regarding online and hybrid courses are clear. Such courses must provide the same number of total hours of classroom instruction as a traditional, 14 week course. Hence, 3-credit online and hybrid courses must provide a minimum of 42 contact hours for students.

The regulations, however, do provide some flexibility when it comes to meeting this requirement. To wit, colleges are permitted to determine what learning activities constitute the equivalent of class time for purposes of satisfying the 42 hour contact hour requirement. In its guidance on this issue, PDE makes the following points:

The activities that are the equivalent of classroom instruction would best be:
- Directly related to the objectives of the course/program,
- Measurable for grading purposes,
- Have the direct oversight or supervision of the course instructor,
- In some form be the equivalent of an activity conducted in the classroom.

The equivalent content should not be:
- Homework assignments
- "Time spent" (i.e. the amount of time a student spends on a task)

The regulations also make it clear that the faculty at an institution have a principal role to play in regard to the determination of what constitutes equivalency:

Faculty as a whole need to agree upon criteria for determining what online activities constitute the equivalent of classroom instruction for uniform implementation across the institution. Establishing such criteria across the institution and identifying the number of hours each activity would represent as equivalent to instruction will help to ensure that the amount of credit awarded per course complies with Pennsylvania regulations.

On the basis of this discussion, the following inferences seem warranted:

- Homework -- such as required readings -- will not count toward the class time requirement unless it can be explicitly and directly linked to student assessment.
- If most or all of a one hour class period can be dedicated to a particular learning activity, then the use of the same (or similar) learning activity online can be counted as the equivalent of one hour of class time -- regardless of how long it actually takes students to complete the activity.
- Faculty, Departments and the College have the opportunity to determine what constitutes equivalency along with the obligation to document such decisions and the justification for them.
Faculty developing online and hybrid courses should consult with colleagues, department chairs, appropriate faculty committees, the Provost’s Office, and accreditors when it comes to establishing equivalencies between online learning activities and the class time requirement.

### Learning Activities for Online and Hybrid Courses

One of the most comprehensive and helpful introductions to the field of online learning activities can be found at the Online Teaching Activity Index maintained by the Illinois Online Network at the University of Illinois.

The index features over 45 types of learning activities suitable for online and hybrid courses with practical examples drawn from a wide variety of disciplines. The typology is updated frequently and presently includes the following online learning activities:

- Art Projects
- Article Critiques
- Audio Recordings
- Blogging
- Brainstorming
- Case Briefs
- Case Studies
- Concept Mapping
- Debates
- Design Projects
- Document Analysis
- Essays
- Fieldwork
- Gaming
- Group Debugging
- Group Problem Solving
- Group Reports
- Hypothetical Situations
- Ice Breakers
- Inductive Reasoning
- Interviews
- Journaling
- Kinesthetics
- Lab Experiments
- Learning Contracts
- Literature Reviews
- Multimedia Presentations
- Oral Reports
- Peer Review
- Portfolios
- Presentations
- Procedural Demonstrations
- Student Q&A
- Quizzes
- Reflections
- Reviews
- Role Playing
- Scavenger Hunts
- Simulations
- Socratic Dialogue
- Web Design
- Wikis

The index also presents each learning activity in terms of nine key pedagogical issues:

- Goals and Objectives
- Prerequisites
- Materials and Resources Needed
- Guiding Questions for the Activity
- Activity Outline and Procedure
• Teaching Strategies
• Accommodations
• Timeline Needed for Completion of the Activity
• Assessment Techniques

The Online Teaching Activity Index can be found at www.ion.uillinois.edu/resources/otai/

Online and Hybrid Course Development Best Practices

INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN

1. Course Goals and Structure
   a. Course goals and learning outcomes are explicitly stated.
   b. Course content is clearly aligned with stated goals and objectives.
   c. Course content is sequenced in a clear, concise and logical manner.
   d. In the case of a hybrid course, the relationship between the in-class and online components of the course is clear.
   e. A clear and concise list of course modules is provided.
   f. A clear and concise list of the activities that must be completed within each module is provided.
   g. Student learning outcomes for the course are clearly stated.
   h. Student learning outcomes and topics covered are stated for each course unit.
   i. The course meets the state curricular credit policy requirement.

2. Course Information
   a. A course description is provided, including any prerequisites.
   b. Instructor information is provided, including contact and availability information and a picture
   c. A list of supplies (e.g. textbooks and other materials) needed for the course is provided.
   d. The number of credit hours to be earned in the course is stated.
   e. Grading policy is clearly stated, including grading scale and weights.
   f. A calendar of course due dates, institutional deadlines, and exam schedule is provided.
   g. A list of technical competencies necessary for the course is provided.
   h. A list of hardware and software requirements for the course is provided.
   i. A statement on plagiarism and penalties for plagiarism is provided.
   j. A statement of the College Honor Code is provided.
   k. Etiquette expectations ("netiquette") for online discussions, email, and other forms of communication are stated clearly.

3. Instructional Strategies
a. A variety of instructional methods, accommodating multiple learning styles, are available throughout the course.
b. Students have a variety of opportunities to demonstrate academic achievement.
c. At the beginning of the course, students and the instructor are provided with an opportunity to introduce themselves to each other as a way of promoting a cooperative learning environment.

4. Use of Multimedia
   a. Audio files utilized in the course clearly support course goals/objectives.
   b. Video files utilized in the course clearly support course goals/objectives.

COMMUNICATION, INTERACTION AND COLLABORATION

1. Activities and Opportunities
   a. Learning activities and other opportunities are provided to foster student-to-student communication and/or collaboration.
   b. Learning activities and other opportunities are provided to foster student-to-instructor communication and/or collaboration.
   c. Learning activities and other opportunities are provided to foster student-to-content interaction.

2. Organization and Management
   a. Course offers separate forums for community, course questions and content.
   b. Discussions are organized in clearly defined forums and/or threads.
   c. Access is available to individuals and groups based upon the discussion’s purpose (e.g. private conversations between student and instructor, group work and class interactions)
   d. The instructor’s role in discussion activities is clearly defined.

3. Group Work
   a. A statement of the group’s overall task is provided.
   b. Rules for forming groups and assigning roles within the group are provided.
   c. Benchmarks and expectations for group participation are clearly stated.
   d. A statement of how, when and where the final product will be delivered is provided.

ASSESSMENT of STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

1. Goals and Objectives
   a. Assessment and evaluation are aligned with learning objectives.
   b. Assessment and evaluation goals are clearly communicated.

2. Strategies
   a. Assessments and evaluations use multiple methods (e.g. quizzes, tests, discussions, essays, projects and survey).
b. Assessments and evaluations are conducted on an ongoing basis throughout the course.

c. Assessments and evaluation tools are appropriate to the task of measuring stated learning outcomes.

d. Assessments and evaluations are administered in ways that minimize the likelihood of Honor Code violations.

3. Grades
a. Explicit rubrics, rationales, and/or criteria are provided for each graded assignment.

b. Procedures for reporting grade information complies with FERPA and institutional regulations.

c. A grading scale that defines letter grades and/or weights is provided.

d. Penalties which can be assessed against student grades are listed.

e. Student participation is defined and the rubric, rational or criteria for evaluating the quality and quantity of student participation is provided.

f. A statement indicating whether extra credit is available is provided along with a description of how extra credit assignments will be administered and submitted.

g. A statement explaining when students should receive feedback is provided.

h. A statement explaining what type feedback students will receive is provided.

i. A statement explaining how feedback will be given is provided.

4. Management
a. A statement of the time allocated for each assignment/activity is provided.

b. A deadline for each assignment/activity is provided.

c. A date/time when each assignment will be available is provided.

d. A statement indicating whether assignments can be retaken is provided.

e. Instructions for completion and submission of assignments is provided.

LEARNER SUPPORT AND RESOURCES

1. Institutional/Program Support and Resources
a. Links to institutional/program information and/or policies and procedures are provided.

b. Links to tutorials and other CMS support sites are provided.

c. Links, e-mail addresses and/or phone number for technical support are provided.

d. Statement of ADA compliance and procedure for requesting special services is provided.

2. Academic Support and Resources
a. Opportunities for program and course orientation are provided.

b. A list of academic resources with links to library, writing center, and other services is provided.

c. A grade book is available to students for checking progress.

WEB DESIGN
1. **Layout/Design**
   a. Scrolling is minimized or facilitated with anchors.
   b. Consistent layout design is utilized throughout the site.
   c. Font type, size and color are readable and consistent throughout the site.
   d. Use of pop-up windows is appropriate.
   e. Windows open in appropriate frames.

2. **Use of Multimedia**
   a. Audio/video hardware requirements do not extend beyond basic soundcards, speakers and video players unless needed to accomplish specific course goals and objectives.
   b. Audio/video quality is clear.
   c. Audio/video file length is adequate to meet the goals of an activity but do not restrict students’ ability to download the file on computers with lower bandwidth.
   d. Audio/video file length is adequate to meet the goals of an activity without adding unnecessary information.
   e. Audio/video player required is compatible with multiple operating systems and requires only a standard, free plug-in.

3. **Use of Images**
   a. Images are clear.
   b. Image files are optimized for efficient loading.
   c. Use of animated GIFs is limited to only those that support course content.

4. **Links/Navigation**
   a. Navigation aids are located in the same location throughout the site.
   b. Graphics used as links are consistent throughout the site.
   c. Navigation cues are present, clearly identifiable, offered in text and graphic formats and are obvious links based on visual clues such as color, underlining, and text directives.
   d. Course has no broken links.
   e. Hyperlinks open in appropriate windows or frames.

5. **Accessibility**
   a. Course design indicates a conscious attempt to comply with, or exceed, Level 1 of Section 508(B) accessibility standards. [Section 508 is from the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 that requires government agencies to ensure their electronic media are accessible to individuals with disabilities. Educational institutions use this standard as a benchmark.]
   b. A text equivalent for every non-text element is provided.
   c. Captioning options are available for audio portions of multimedia presentations.
   d. Redundant text links are provided for links embedded on server-side image maps. Information conveyed with color is also available without color.
   e. When a web page requires an applet, plug-in or other application, the page provides a link to the needed plug-in or applet.
f. When a timed response is required, the user is alerted and given time to indicate that more time is needed.
g. Row and column headers are identified in data tables.

COURSE EVALUATION

a. Opportunities for students to offer feedback on the web design of the course (e.g. navigation, links) is available throughout the course.
b. Opportunities for students to offer feedback to the instructor on instructional strategies is available throughout the course.
c. Opportunities for students to offer feedback on course content is available throughout the course.