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Guide to Best Practices in Online Teaching

Online Teaching and Learning Committee  
Cuyamaca College

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Dear Faculty Members,

Teaching an online course for the first time can be a daunting proposition, especially since achieving academic quality is not simply a matter of transferring a replica of what you do in classroom to the online environment. Online learning requires students to become more active learners; so most instructors need to learn to teach somewhat differently—to become “a guide on the side instead of a sage on the stage”. They must also learn how to use various new forms of technology—while maintaining the same level of academic rigor they have always delivered in the classroom. The *Guide to Best Practices in Online Teaching*, created by the Online Teaching and Learning Committee, was written with these issues in mind.

These standards focus on the needs of instructors, students, and administrators, offering guidelines in areas such as instructor competencies, technical support, equipment needs, rigor, contract issues, costs, student needs, accessibility, and other student support services. It was written to be a set of benchmarks the college should strive to meet whenever possible. It should be noted the committee engaged in intensive discussions and research in order to develop these standards. Indeed, the *Guide to Best Practices in Online Teaching* is truly a group effort.

The Online Teaching and Learning Committee hopes the *Guide to Best Practices in Online Teaching* proves to be a useful resource, a guide that will inspire all involved parties to continue to create a quality online learning program at Cuyamaca College. If you have any further questions or concerns about the issues described in this document, please contact any committee member. We are always happy to mentor interested instructors.

Sincerely,

Cindy Morrin, Connie Elder  
Co-Chairs of the Online Teaching and Learning Committee

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Online Teaching and Learning Committee at Cuyamaca College recommends the following Best Practices for all online instruction. These standards incorporate the combined practical knowledge gleaned from online instructors at Cuyamaca College, as well as information gathered from research in the field.

The Online Teaching and Learning Committee works in conjunction with the Instructional Technology Committee and the Curriculum Committee and submits recommendations for consideration and approval to those bodies as needed. In addition, it coordinates and communicates with the Instructional Technology Committee, Academic Senate, Instructional Council and other college committees when appropriate. The committee is comprised of ten faculty members: seven from Instruction, one from the Library, one from Student Services, one from Disabled Student Program and Services, the Instructional Design Technology Specialist, Dean of Learning and Technology Resources and an additional instructional administrator.

This Guide to Best Practices has been developed to serve as a guideline and recommendation for instructors, students, and administrators to follow to ensure the college is offering a quality online educational experience for all involved.

## **OVERVIEW: REGULATIONS AND GUIDELINES**

Title V, section 55200 of the California Code of Regulations, defines Distance Education as “instruction in which the instructor and student are separated by distance and interact through the assistance of communication technology. Instruction provided as distance education is subject to the requirements that may be imposed by the Americans with Disabilities act and section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.” Further, section 55002 establishes that “the same standards of course quality shall be applied to any portion of a course conducted through distance education as are applied to traditional classroom courses, in regard to the course quality judgment made pursuant to the requirement of section 55002, and in regard to any local course quality determination of review process.”

Most significantly, in section 55204, the California code goes on to say “any portion of a course conducted through distance education includes **regular effective contact** between instructor and students, through group or individual meetings, orientation and review sessions, supplemental seminar or study sessions, field trips, library workshops, telephone contact, correspondence, voice mail, e-mail, or other activities.” All distance education sections are subject to the same local and state approval standards and procedures and should be considered a “virtual equivalent” to a classroom-based course.

For accreditation requirements, **instructors must utilize a student authentication system** such as Blackboard or another system that provides a secure login and password.

## **ONLINE FACULTY QUALIFICATIONS AND TRAINING**

The [Online Instructor Certification Policy](#) has been endorsed by the Academic Senate (see [Minutes of 5/14/09](#)) of Cuyamaca College and the Instructional Council, a body comprised of all department chairs and coordinators, all instructional deans, and the Vice President of Instruction. An instructor who meets the preparation guidelines in the Online Instructor Certification Policy is presumed to have the following:

### **Instructor Competencies**

#### Online Teaching Pedagogy

- **Designing an effective syllabus.**
- **Designing learning environments that support a variety of learning styles.**
- Designing learning environments that conform to federal and state accessibility requirements for people with disabilities (California Distance Education Accessibility Guidelines).
- **Creating course content pages so that they support web user reading techniques.**
- **Using technologies to provide content in multiple media formats to support the formation of more robust mental models.**
- Designing course materials that are easy to use.
- Creating a supportive online course community.
- Observing copyright and fair use policies and guidelines.

In addition, the following technical and administrative training should occur via @One or equivalent courses or professional development courses.

#### Technical Training

- Navigating the LMS, Blackboard. Blackboard is the District standard and as such, the college can only offer training and support on that platform.
- Utilizing a web conferencing tool, such as CCC Confer or Skype.
- Becoming familiar with all available technologies offered by the college.
- Developing a faculty website with essential elements and providing its location to students.

#### Accessibility of Content

- Elements other than color are used to convey information.
- Exaggerate color contrast.
- Descriptive hyperlinks.
- Image identification.
  - Alternate text description.
  - Include description within page text.
  - "longdesc" attribute to link to an informational page.
- Accessible PowerPoint/Word documents available.
- Accessible PDF documents or provide alternate format.
- Appropriate row and column headers in tables using "table header" methods or scope attribute.
- Text transcript of all audio information. If the person creating the audio file can, they should imbed the transcript. If this is not possible, a secondary transcript/Word document or PDF will suffice.
- Captioning of all video/media content.
- Make sure playback controls can be accessed from the keyboard.

- Interactive experiences must be accessible or an alternate available that conveys the same educational objective.

#### Administrative Training

- Adding / Dropping a Student in an Online or Hybrid Class.
- Giving a Student an Incomplete in an Online or Hybrid Class.

### **GUIDELINES FOR COURSE DELIVERY AND DEVELOPMENT**

Courses should be designed in such a way as to require students to engage in analysis and integration of new knowledge. A focus on critical thinking skills should be paramount.

#### **Development:**

- For accreditation requirements, **instructors must utilize a student authentication system**, such as Blackboard or another system that provides a secure login and password.
- Provide clear instructions on how to get started in the class and where to find various course components – a virtual roadmap. Navigation throughout the online components of the course should be logical, consistent, and efficient.
- Organize the course in a logical format well in advance of the course. Consider breaking your course into weekly modules that help students stay on track in the course.
- Clearly delineate course requirements including a timeline for completion of course material and meeting of course objectives. Discourage lateness and encourage promptness by explaining consequences.
- Schedule any online or on-campus orientations and examinations prior to the beginning of the course and communicate to students at least one week in advance of the course. It is important to note that any required on-campus exams and orientations, as well as proctored exams must be noted in the course schedule.
- Supply course goals, expectations, structure and related policies at the beginning of the course.
- Create a welcome / orientation message. It is particularly meaningful if presented via short video. Instructional Computing Services has set up equipment and support staff to make this easy and quick. Please contact [Rhonda.bauerlein@gcccd.edu](mailto:Rhonda.bauerlein@gcccd.edu) to make arrangements.
- Delineate all instructional policies early in the course.
- Clearly state all learning outcomes and assure that module/unit learning objectives correlate with them.
- Use multiple methods to assess student learning.

- Direct students to [District online information](#) regarding student success in online courses.
- Define academic integrity and cheating and clearly define what is considered dishonest and unacceptable.
- Fully use the available technologies to enhance student learning by creating podcasts, e-lectures, short videos or other multi-media.
- Clearly express grading criteria to guide student work. Consider using rubrics.
- Rubrics are particularly useful when grading discussion board entries. We recommend emphasizing analytical thought and integration of information in discussion board rubrics.
- Design instructional materials according to [established accessibility guidelines](#).

### **Delivery:**

- As noted, Title 5 requires **regular effective contact** in online teaching. Some approaches to satisfying this include:
  - Learning activities that foster instructor-student, content-student, and if appropriate to the course, student-student interaction (e.g. e-mail, discussion, phone, online conferences).
  - Instructor responsiveness and availability standards (turn-around time for email, grade posting, etc.) are clearly stated and are commensurate to that of face-to-face class (3 hours for 3-unit class).
  - Requirements for student interaction are clearly articulated
  - Instructor reads online discussions and **responds as appropriate**.
  - The instructor posts weekly announcements that help students navigate the course.
  - The instructor provides constructive and timely feedback on assignments.
- Suggestions for ensuring that the student enrolled in an online course/section is doing the work include, but are not limited to:
  - Providing on-campus or proctored exams.
  - Awarding grades based on work product rather than exams.
  - Making assignments requiring personal or original work.
  - Posting a detailed plagiarism policy.
  - Using anti-plagiarism software.
  - Using timed tests (there is not enough time for students to look up every answer).
  - Using randomization for test questions.
  - Requiring personal identification.
- Online instructors should provide a course orientation. This may be on campus in person, online, or a combination of both. Of course the nature of the orientation should reflect the needs of the subject matter as well as the students. The following are topics recommended for any orientation to an online course:
  - Overview of the instructor website and course home page.

- Overview of the instructor course management system (note students may have taken other online classes but may not have used the same course management system you have selected).
  - General technical information for getting started including user names, passwords, plug-ins, hardware and software requirements, troubleshooting common difficulties, and an overview of computer issues.
  - Methods of communication including how students can reach the instructor and how soon they should expect a response. It may be appropriate to loosely define instructor online hours; i.e. instructor frequently works online late at night, instructor works online early in the morning, instructor will check online every day except most Sundays.
  - Overview of the class itself including how to submit assignments, deadlines, mechanics of test-taking, discussion boards, chat rooms, presentations, text book requirements, and other required materials.
  - Where to find course information, how to navigate your course website, and links to further resources.
  - Attributes of successful students.
- Actively facilitate student interaction through asynchronous and/or synchronous opportunities with you and their peers. This can be done through the use of the discussion board, chat, social media, email, telephone, and web conferencing tools. (Synchronous communications are more important in some courses/disciplines than others).
  - Offer weekly “virtual office hours” at various times to accommodate student schedules. These can be brief sessions that are recorded for those who miss the sessions.
  - Provide timely, comprehensive and continuous feedback/grades on student assignments within 1-2 weeks and clearly state this expected turn-around time in a course document (such as syllabus).
  - It is recommended that faculty respond within 24 hours, excluding weekends, to questions. It is important to communicate this policy to students.
  - Instruct students in proper methods of effective research, including the assessment of the validity of the resource, plagiarism and copyright issues. Consider using some of the [online library tutorials](#).
  - Provide opportunities for students to ask questions so as to ensure accuracy of understanding. Consider creating a discussion board thread entitled “Questions on Assignments” or “Questions for the Instructor”. Encourage students to answer each other’s questions as well.
  - Emphasize the importance of good study skills throughout the course by providing them with links to information on “how to be a good online student”. This includes being a proactive learner by regularly logging in to the course site, submitting assignments on time, and participating in course discussions. Define how often you would like the students to login to the course (example: a

minimum of 4 times a week). **Follow-up with students who are not actively participating.**

- Manage the “virtual” classroom on a regular basis to ensure that students are completing required assignments and achieving student learning outcomes. You can use tracking features in Blackboard to see how and how often students are accessing the course
- **Establish and follow a drop policy for inactivity.** Some recommended language is: “Students who are inactive will be dropped from the course. If an entire week goes by with no activity on your part either through the discussion board participation, email communication, or submission of work, quiz, or exam, you will be dropped. Therefore, it is imperative that you let me know if, for some reason, your contribution to the class will be interrupted.” In reality, we recommend you send a warning notification to students after a week of inactivity and allow a few days for them to respond.
- Include a statement regarding Disabled Student Programs and Services in the class syllabus. Some recommended language is: Academic accommodations are available for students with verified disabilities. It is highly recommended that students with disabilities notify the instructor and contact Disabled Student Services & Programs (DSPS) early in the semester (first two weeks of school) so that reasonable accommodations may be implemented as soon as possible. It is the student’s responsibility to make sure the instructor has a copy of the student’s accommodations and to be proactive and self-advocate. If you feel you need accommodations and do not yet have them, contact Disabled Student Programs and Services at 619-660-4239. The DSPS website is [http://www.cuyamaca.edu/dsps/.](http://www.cuyamaca.edu/dsps/)”
- Although this is not appropriate for all online classes, some faculty find it helpful to conduct synchronous web conferencing sessions. Web conferencing provides the following advantages to online teachers and online students:
  - Students can virtually “raise their hand” to ask questions, and get immediate feedback
  - Students can chat and collaborate with each other using the chat tool
  - Lectures can be captioned for accessibility
  - Recorded lectures can be viewed by students unable to attend the live lecture.
  - Recorded lectures can be paused when needed which makes it easier for students to take notes, and allows students to focus on concepts rather than writing notes
  - Application sharing allows the instructor or students to share any document, program, and website with the class
  - The virtual whiteboard can be used in conjunction with a writing tablet to simulate the writing done on a whiteboard found in a physical classroom
  - The whiteboard can be saved for later reference
  - A web cam allows the instructor to communicate with the class via video, creating a more personal interaction with students

## **STUDENTS**

### **Profile of Successful Students**



Successful online students:

- Are self-motivated.
- Are able to stay on-task.
- Possess basic computer skills and are able to meet class software and internet requirements: email, word processing, getting files from other locations, sending and receiving files, saving a file, cutting and pasting, and other skills specific to course content and technical level of the class.
- Manage their time.
- Take responsibility for their own work product.
- Are tenacious (sometimes the problems get sticky).
- Are able to work alone.
- Are willing to communicate with the class **as required**.

It remains the student's responsibility to manage hardware, software, Internet, and connectivity problems. Network and Internet problems should be addressed by contacting the student's Internet service provider. Students should be advised to have a back-up plan in case they encounter computer problems (computer crashes) or software that does not work properly. Student can visit the district website for information pertaining to log-on problems for Blackboard at <http://www.gcccd.edu/online/student/blackboard/default.html> websites for further information regarding how to use Blackboard.

### Student Support

- Encourage students to attend a Blackboard orientation session when offered.
- Direct students to <http://www.gcccd.edu/online/student/default.html>.
- Provide a quiz for students who are considering taking an online course before they even register. Encourage them to take it the week prior to the start of the class if they have already registered. Here is a link to a good quiz:  
[https://www.waol.org/prospective\\_students/isonlineforme.aspx](https://www.waol.org/prospective_students/isonlineforme.aspx)

### Resources

- Blackboard & Website Support for faculty: Rhonda Bauerlein at [rhonda.bauerlein@gcccd.edu](mailto:rhonda.bauerlein@gcccd.edu) or 660-4413
- Accessibility Support: Brian Josephson at [brian.josephson@gcccd.edu](mailto:brian.josephson@gcccd.edu) or 660-4394
- General Questions on Distance Ed: Connie Elder at [connie.elder@gcccd.edu](mailto:connie.elder@gcccd.edu) or 660-4400
- Cuyamaca College Help Desk at [c-helpdesk@gcccd.edu](mailto:c-helpdesk@gcccd.edu) or 660-4395
- District IS Help Desk at [is-ops@gcccd.edu](mailto:is-ops@gcccd.edu) or 644-7547
- Library Resources: <http://www.cuyamaca.edu/library/>
- Library Research Tutorials:  
<http://www.cuyamaca.edu/library/research/tutorials.asp>
- Faculty Blackboard Assistance: <http://www.gcccd.edu/online/faculty/default.html>
- [Teaching Online Resources at Cuyamaca College](#)
- Academic Integrity: [Strategies to Promote Academic Integrity in Online Education](#)
- DSPS: <http://www.cuyamaca.edu/dsps/>
- Tutoring: <http://www.cuyamaca.edu/tutoring.asp>
- Accessibility:  
<http://www.cuyamaca.edu/tlc/workshops/access/pdf/accesschecklist.pdf>

- Netiquette Rules: <http://www.brighthub.com/education/online-learning/articles/26946.aspx>