

**United University Professions
Technology Issues Committee**

Best Practices for Online Learning

It has been some time since the development of the UUP document entitled *Intellectual Property, Software and Distance Learning: SUNY Policy and UUP Recommendations*. Since that time, the number of online classes has increased and the methods used to offer these classes have changed. In order to address these changes, to assure that our students are getting a quality education, and to provide our faculty necessary support and autonomy, the Technology Issues Committee (TIC) of the United University Professions (UUP) was charged with developing “best practices for online programs.” This document is a result of that charge.

Definitions

The following terms are commonly used in discussing online learning. Although terminology changes over time, current terms and their meanings are listed below:

Distance Education occurs when the instructor and the students are in physically separate locations. Distance education includes some form of technology and may be synchronous or asynchronous.

Synchronous learning occurs when both the student and instructor are present in the course at the same time.

Asynchronous learning occurs when the student and instructor are not necessarily present in the course at the same time.

An *online class* is an e-learning class taken over the Internet or World Wide Web (WWW) as opposed to using a local or wide area network.

A *traditional class* is one in which the students and faculty always meet face to face in the same physical space.

Blended or hybrid learning uses a combination of online and traditional classroom instruction.

A *course management system or a learning management system* is software that facilitates online learning by providing tools for course support such as content management, collaboration, assessment, tracking and grading.

Student Issues

- **Student Retention**

In her 2006 paper on student success in online learning, Jackie Long-Goding focuses on student success in terms of retention.¹ The paper defines four elements of best practice for student retention:

1. **Readiness**

In addition to being interested in taking online classes, students should have time-management skills, self-motivation, communication skills, and awareness that the requirements for success are similar to those in traditional classes. They should also know how to use the technology required for the class. Numerous tests can be used to assess student readiness, and such a test should be provided as a mandatory online readiness component with the possibility of unprepared students being asked to reconsider their decision to enroll in online or hybrid classes.

2. **Orientation activities**

- Course Access Information: After registering for an online or hybrid class, students should be provided with clear information from the college on how to access the online class and where to get help with technical issues.
- Learning Management System (LMS) Orientation: Students should be provided with an orientation to the most frequently used components of the LMS they will use for the online or hybrid class. This orientation should be required for all students taking their first online or hybrid class using the LMS.

3. **Sense of community**

Although they are physically isolated from their instructor and classmates, students in online classes should feel a sense of belonging. This can be accomplished by incorporating discussions, group projects, and timely instructor feedback into the class.

4. **Institutional support**

Several areas of institutional support are obligatory for online students as well as those enrolled in blended classes:

- Availability of Learning Management System: The LMS should be consistently and easily available for students and faculty. Frustration levels increase when students are ready to access the course and it is unavailable because of technological issues.

¹ Long-Goding, J. L. *Success in an Online Learning Environment*. June 22, 2006, <http://www.decadeconsulting.com/dc/documents/StudentSuccess.pdf>

- **Technical Support:** A help desk should be convenient and generally available to support students with technical issues.
- **Single Contact Person or Office:** In addition to technical support, an institution should have a single office or person to serve as the students' contact regarding questions concerning online or hybrid classes and programs.

- **Online Registration and Payment Systems**
Students taking online classes should be able to register and pay for these classes online since many of these students have difficulty accessing the campus during regular office hours.

- **Academic Honesty**
The institution should ensure that safeguards are built into the online or hybrid learning format so that online students are held to the same standards of academic honesty as students in traditional classes.

- **Evaluation of Class and Faculty Member**
Safeguards should ensure that the faculty member is fairly evaluated by students in a manner that mirrors the procedure used in evaluating faculty in traditional classes.

Faculty Issues

- **Academic Freedom**

- Selection of Materials: As with materials used in a traditional class, the materials used in an online class are the purview of the course instructor. Textbook selection, if any, should be based on the academic department policy, which allows either the individual instructor or the department to make the selection.
- Quality Control of the Curriculum: The academic department should be responsible for the quality of the educational program – whether the class is online, hybrid or a traditional class. The methods of assessment of an online or hybrid class should be equivalent to those used in the assessment of a traditional class.

- **Working Conditions**

- Workload and Teaching Responsibilities: The time needed to develop an online course from a traditional course can be extensive. Similarly, once the course is developed, responding to students and grading their work can be extremely time-consuming. The additional time required for developing and teaching online or hybrid courses should be a consideration in determining a faculty member's workload.
- Enrollment: The determination of class size for a distance education class should be based on pedagogical considerations² that acknowledge the need for smaller class sizes than those of traditional classes.
- Online Office Hours: The institution should have a policy that addresses office hours for teachers with online courses and recognizes that online office hours are included in total required office hours.

- **Teaching Appointments**

- Faculty members who teach online or hybrid courses do so only on a volunteer basis unless they were hired to teach the online or hybrid format.
- The precise terms and conditions of every online or hybrid course appointment should be written and in the possession of the faculty member and the institution before the faculty member is assigned to teach online or hybrid courses.
- No member of the faculty should be expected to participate in online or hybrid courses without adequate preparation and training.

² American Association of University Professors. *Sample Distance Education Policy & Contract Language*.
<http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/issues/DE/sampleDE.htm>.

- **Intellectual Property: Ownership of Materials**
 - Materials: The materials created by faculty members for online or hybrid classes should be treated in exactly the same fashion as materials created by faculty members for traditional classes.
 - Future Use: The faculty member who develops the online or hybrid class should exercise complete control over the future observation, use, modification, and distribution of instructional material and should determine whether the material should be revised or withdrawn from use. Access to a past class should be available only to the instructor, or with the instructor's permission.

- **Observations of Faculty**

Safeguards should be in place to ensure that a faculty member teaching an online or hybrid class is observed in a manner that mirrors the observation of faculty in traditional classes. No one should access an online or hybrid class without prior notice to the faculty member, and the faculty member should have the right to obtain logs or other records of any access activities.

- **Technical Support**
 - Available Technology and Equipment: The institution should provide the faculty member with the necessary equipment to teach the distance education course.
 - Training for Teaching: Online or hybrid classes often require teaching methods very different from those used in traditional classes. Faculty members should be taught both technological and pedagogical methods that will help them develop online classes that are appropriate for students and maintain all necessary content. This should include regularly available one-on-one support.
 - Available Assistance: Just as students need a high level of support to use the technology, so do faculty. The institution should assure that faculty teaching online or hybrid classes have timely responses to any technical issues that arise.

- **Training for Developing ADA-compliant online courses:**
 - The institution should provide faculty members with the resources and support necessary to educate themselves regarding ADA compliance for online course materials and components, and to create or alter those materials/components to be fully ADA-compliant.

Course and Program Issues

When an institution offers online or hybrid classes, that institution may realize overall increased enrollment without some of the associated overhead inherent in traditional classes. The institution offering these classes, however, has certain responsibilities:

- **Reasons for Development**
Online and hybrid classes are developed to meet the needs of students, such as those who cannot meet the schedule of the institution's traditional classes.
- **Commitment**
Institutions successful with Internet-supported learning have a strong commitment to the initiative.³ Planning for online classes requires a long-term commitment, investment of resources, program planning, and transparency of the plan. This commitment should be recognized and fully supported by the institution's administration, faculty and staff.
- **Effects on On-Campus Programs and Faculty**
Online or hybrid classes cannot be used to reduce the number of faculty.

³ Alliance for Higher Education Competitiveness (A-HEC). *Achieving Success in Internet-Supported Learning in Higher Education: Case Studies Illuminate Success Factors, Challenges, and Future Directions*. http://www.a-hec.org/media/files/A-HEC_IsL0205_6.pdf.

Conclusion

The following considerations are essential to the success of online or hybrid instruction:

- Online or hybrid classes should support the mission of the college.
- Proper planning is needed to support both the students who enroll in online or hybrid classes and the faculty who teach them.
- Enrolled students should be capable of the self-directed work required for online or hybrid classes and they should be aware that the requirements are similar to those of a traditional class.
- Students should be provided with course access information from the college which includes the hardware and software requirements necessary to access the course materials.
- Students should have sufficient technical support to use the Learning Management System of the class.
- Teaching online or hybrid classes should be voluntary unless faculty were hired to teach the online or hybrid format.
- Faculty should be trained and supported in developing and teaching online or hybrid classes.
- Faculty members should ensure that the content covered in an online or hybrid class is, at a minimum, equivalent to that in a traditional class.
- Support for online and hybrid classes should, at a minimum, be at a level of support for traditional classes.
- Student evaluation of online and hybrid classes should mirror that used for traditional classes.
- Rules for the observation of online and hybrid courses should mirror those for traditional classroom observations.
- Faculty ownership of online content and related materials should be honored.
- Faculty should have the support needed to create online courses that meet the Americans with Disabilities Act requirements for accessible design.

- Office hours provided to online students should be counted in a faculty member's required office hours.