

# 2007

Westchester Community  
College

Distance Learning  
Advisory Committee

## **Guidelines for Best Practices in Online Courses**

# Guidelines for Best Practices in Online Courses

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## Project Introduction

This document was developed by the Westchester Community College Distance Learning Advisory Committee in the fall of 2007. The Advisory Committee was charged to define best practices in online course development.

### THE GUIDELINE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

To develop the **“Guidelines for Best Practices in Online Courses”** document for faculty, the committee reviewed existing rubrics and best practices documents, websites, and standards. With the increasing use of course management systems such as WebCT/Blackboard, there is a need to support instructors as they transition from teaching in the face-to-face classroom to the online classroom. The group believed the approach to teaching online should be informed by a clear theoretical framework.

The group’s goal was to provide faculty with a roadmap that would help guide them through the major issues in the process of course design and delivery in a fully Internet-based course.

It is our hope that the document that resulted will enhance teaching and learning by helping faculty use WebCT Blackboard (and other online/Internet-based tools) to develop courses that are learner-focused, promote active learning, guided discovery, and the construction of new knowledge, and provide a variety of options that encourage reflection, interaction, and collaboration among students and faculty.

I wish acknowledge the committee members and thank them for their hard work. Members of the committee were: Carol Klein, Chair; Melissa Acevedo, Carolyn Christesen, Bill Costanzo, Jodi Cotton, Cay DeSa, Carolyn Dileo, Jeannine Epps, John Flynn, Rowan Lindley, Mira Sakrajda, Sean Simpson, Christine Timm, David Strober, Eileen Walsh, Frank Fato, Kent Trickel, and Robert Albano.

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## 1. ORGANIZATION AND DESIGN

The home page is simple, clear and well organized

Navigational instructions make the organization of the course easy to understand

The course syllabus and any other introductory documents are included as needed.

The outline for the entire semester is included as well as course objectives, learning outcomes, grading policy, attendance policy, requirements for course interaction, standards for instructor response and availability, standards for students including the Academic Honesty policy and the Online Code of Conduct, links to resources

The course design is visually pleasing and functional.

The organization of the course is consistent from module to module; modules are organized in a standardized format.

For more details see Appendix to Organization and Design

## 2. OBJECTIVES

The learning objectives of the course are clearly stated.

All of the learning activities are aligned with stated course objectives and/or learning outcomes.

## 3. CONTENT

Instructional materials support stated learning objectives, student competencies, and outcomes

Content is appropriate for level of students, is current and reliable, is suitable for different learning styles, is presented clearly in portions of reasonable size

## 4. INTERACTION

Student interaction with Instructors is supported by the provision of frequent opportunities for both public and private interactions, by the establishment of clear expectations for instructor-student interactions and by the provision of timely and supportive feedback.

Interaction with classmates is promoted by the inclusion of community-building activities that support student-to-student interaction which encourage students to seek out and share information with each other.

## 5. ASSESSMENT

Assessment activities are closely aligned to learning objectives.

Different assessment strategies are used to measure knowledge and/or skills.

The assessment instruments selected are varied and appropriate for the content being assessed.

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Students are given feedback regarding their performances on assessment tools in a timely fashion. Online discussions are monitored on a regular basis.

Opportunities for student self-assessment and/or peer feedback exist within the course.

The expectations of the assessment are stated clearly.

The grading policies for the course are stated clearly.

The assessments include a variety of learning levels such as the application or analysis level of learning in addition to lower level learning.

Policies and procedures in the course promote the integrity of the students' work.

## 6. STUDENT RESOURCES

Distance Learning students are able to link to the following resources or information from their entry page (myBlackboard) and/or from their course homepages: Distance Learning Office, Distance Learning Technical Support, Distance Learning Counselor, Online Code of Conduct, Copyright Policies, Netiquette Guidelines, Off-Campus Proctoring Arrangements, Library and Virtual Librarian, Academic Honesty Policy, Disabilities Office, College Homepage, Academic Support Center and other relevant tutorials, e.g., Writing Center, Math Tutorial.

## 7. TECHNOLOGY

Technology is integrated into course content in a purposeful manner. The use of media is focused on the most important ideas and concepts in the course. Course technologies are geared towards and appropriate for course outcomes.

Student minimum technology requirements are accurately and clearly stated. Assistance with technology questions (FAQ, helpdesk, and orientation) is provided through the distance learning office. The course instructions articulate or link to a clear description of the technical support offered. Information is provided to students about minimum and optimal hardware/software configurations (e.g., which browsers work most effectively). A contingency plan is in place in case the technology fails either the student or the faculty. "What if" scenarios are spelled out for the student, so that there are no surprises.

Specific plug-ins required for the course (such as Adobe Reader, Flash player, Quicktime) are identified. Links to necessary plug-ins are included. Potential connectivity issues are addressed by providing work-around solutions (e.g., offering video files on CD-ROM to avoid lengthy download times). If an e-pack is used in the course, students are given instructions to obtain an access code.

The course follows the accessibility guidelines. Standard layout is used throughout the web site. Textual as well as graphical navigation aids and links are provided. Meaningful and descriptive text for hyperlinks is provided (being careful not to use certain wording like "as you see" or "click here"). The use of unnecessary icons, graphics and photographs is avoided. Header tags and Ariel or Verdana fonts with double or 1.5 line spacing are recommended for documents.

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## WORKS CITED

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"Online Course Development Guidelines and Rubric." Virtual Learning Collaborative – Michigan Community College. 19 February 2008 <<http://www.mccvlc.org/%7Estaff/Course-Guidelines-Rubric-v1.2.html>>.

"Rubric for Online Instruction." Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching – California State University, Chico. 19 February 2008 <<http://www.csuchico.edu/celt/roi/index.shtml>>.

"Quality Matters: Inter-Institutional Quality Assurance in Online Learning / Peer Course Review Rubric." Eastern Shore Association of Colleges. 19 February 2008 <<http://www.esac.org/fdi/rubric/finalsurvey/demorubric.asp>>

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## APPENDIX TO ORGANIZATION AND DESIGN

### Documents

Welcome Page contains course specific information and requirements available to prospective students before they register. Note: the welcome page is a “public page” and can be read by anyone who has the correct URL.

“Start Here” document or posting on the homepage states clearly what the student is to do at the beginning of the course.

Course Outline contains a syllabus or overview of the entire course.

Contact Information contains the instructor’s WCC email address, telephone number, and any other information the instructor chooses to include.

Course calendar contains the dates for midterm notification, withdrawal, final exams, etc.

Course policies include a clear statement of the instructor’s expectations, standards (e.g., academic honesty, grading) and the different ways the students are expected to participate in the course. (e.g., discussions, quizzes, projects)

Assignments page lists all assignments and activities, the dates they are due and the points assigned to each.

Online Orientation reminder to students lets them know they are expected to complete the online orientation prior to starting the course and are responsible for all materials covered in it.

Required downloads, if applicable, lists required software or plug-ins and hyperlinks to the sites where they are available

Schedule of on-campus tests, if applicable, lists dates/times/locations when students **must** be on-campus and provides information about alternate arrangements for off campus proctored exams.

Assignment instructions include detailed instructions with each activity or assignment; instructions for all activities or assignments are clear.

### Tools

Email and Discussion areas are reset.

Icons’ hidden or release dates are set.

Quiz availability dates are reset.

Gradebook columns are released, as appropriate.

Assignments’ due dates are specified.

### Walk-through

Instructor check of student view to verify that:

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all external hyperlinks work  
all content areas (modules, assignments, quizzes and gradebook) are released/available  
structure, wording, terminology are consistent within each module

Colleague check of student view to identify any areas of the course that are confusing or difficult to follow.

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