

## **Faculty Driven Standards of Excellence for Online and Technology-Enhanced Courses**

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Today's web\_2.0 society has created students (both full and part time) who are increasingly demanding access to more flexible and more technology-driven educational opportunities. This demand for flexibility has led to unprecedented growth in the field of online teaching and learning. As a result, learners have extraordinary access to an overwhelming selection of learning opportunities. The academic legitimacy of these programs, however, can often be in doubt. The primary challenge that faces small schools such as Valley City State University (VCSU) is to retain their instructional 'identity' and academic integrity while attempting to compete for an ever-shrinking pool of enrollment dollars. The task, amidst this rapid expansion, is to ensure that the traditional academic strengths of VCSU are fully reflected and maintained in this new mode of instruction.

Almost every institution with a significant online presence has developed measures of quality for their online offerings. These quality standards, while largely both appropriate and reasonable, are generally presented from a top-down perspective. That is, they are enforced upon a faculty by a centralized administrative office. In contrast, the VCSU Standards of Excellence document has two important differences. First, it was developed by faculty for faculty as they struggled to preserve order and quality in the growing online presence of the university. It was developed in response to the faculty's quest for guidelines to help develop and maintain quality courses. The second difference is that the document defends the instructor's individuality and academic freedom. The standards do not mandate a cookie cutter approach to designing courses. They encourage what is referred to as instructor voice. Instructors handcraft their courses to reflect their own teaching and learning philosophies. Instructor voice is an integral part of the learning experience. These standards represents the initial element of a comprehensive framework for the design, operation, administration and support of VCSU technology-enhanced curriculum programs and course offerings.

In the summer of 2007, a group of faculty met to develop a set of standards to address all these issues. They met throughout the summer and developed the initial version of the standards. During the following school year the document was presented to the whole faculty. Each unit on campus had the opportunity to review the work and to comment. The unit representatives to the faculty senate then brought the comments to a senate meeting. Some of the issues were:

- 1) How do we assess online classes and teaching?
- 2) How do we define the various aspects of online teaching?
- 3) What guidelines are there for creating online courses?
- 4) How does it relate to tenure?
- 5) Is there a difference in traditional tenure evaluations and online tenure evaluations?
- 6) What kind of institutional support will faculty get (release time, money)?
- 7) Who evaluates – who has the expertise?
- 8) What motivation do we have for moving in this direction?
- 9) Who do students go to with concerns?
- 10) How do we move forward with these Standards of Excellence?
- 11) What are the class size limits?
- 12) Who is eligible to take online courses (freshmen, on campus, off campus, etc)

Many of the concerns could be summed up in the words of one faculty member, “We hear that online teaching is different. How will we measure that? Will we have had adequate training to be sure I have the proper support? Are there specific lists of what is expected of me listed in our document? We need to know what is expected of faculty, what is expected of [the office of instructional design]. . . the broad language of our document leaves too much area for various interpretations – and we could suddenly find ourselves expected to do things that we didn’t anticipate.”

The senate asked the original faculty group and any others who wished to join the group to continue working on the standards in order to address the concerns raised. Over the ensuing year the group revised the standards multiple times. The membership of the group was flexible with a small core attending the majority of the meetings. Over all, more than one third of the faculty participated in one or more meetings.

In the fall of 2009, the document was presented to the faculty senate again. The senate unanimously accepted the standards for faculty use in developing technology-enhanced courses.

The VCSU standards are a stark contrast to those experienced by one faculty member who does adjunct work for a large eastern university. She reports that each course or program area has a “chair.” That chair is expected to go into each person’s course under his/her area and ensure that the courses are set up according to expectations. That means the person looks at the syllabus to be sure it’s complete, the grade book to be sure it’s set up, the course assessments to make sure the academic rigor meets expectations, etc. . . ., the conferences [discussion board] must count for at least 20% of the grade, and three assessment projects are expected, as well as the final (which is proctored f2f).

Long regarded as a leading provider of innovative, technology-enhanced instruction, VCSU is the only one of North Dakota’s 11 public higher education institutions that utilizes a ‘distributed administration’

model for its distance learning endeavors. Unfettered by the overhead of additional administrative layers, the VCSU distance model

affords greater flexibility and instructional clarity by incorporating the administration of distance education courses into the day-to-day operations of the individual academic programs. Online instructors at VCSU are not bound by a standardized template for online instruction, each is free to shape their courses as they see fit. There is an attitude among many of the faculty at VCSU that creativity cannot be developed when conformity is enforced. Despite its inherent benefits, however, the distributed model has made the task of developing university-wide quality standards and measures for distance education efforts far more challenging, and has resulted in the model outlined herein.

### **One: *Design Principles for VCSU Technology-Enhanced Curriculum Courses***

To ensure that TEC courses developed and delivered at VCSU maintain and reflect the highest academic standards, and embrace the Defining Commitments of the university, the following design considerations are key pedagogical elements clearly evident in all courses:

- ***Rigor*** – Courses provide a challenging, effective educational experience.
- ***Literacy*** – Courses integrate elements of information, technical, media, and academic literacy.
- ***Communication*** - Courses utilize a diverse array of communication channels and contexts to cultivate a sense of community within the class.
- ***Innovation*** - Courses foster student innovation and problem solving through creative and flexible uses of technology and inventive teaching and learning methods.
- ***Voice*** – Instructors ‘hand craft’ their courses to reflect their own teaching and learning philosophies. Instructor voice is an integral part of the learning experience.
- ***Experiential Exposure*** - Course objectives and activities align with professional skills and competencies required for ‘real-world’ post graduate success.
- ***Global Awareness*** – Courses expand the boundaries of the classroom to promote the appreciation of diversity and a multicultural, global perspective. Courses acknowledge the presence of diverse student populations and learning styles.
- ***Iterative Design*** – Robust feedback and evaluation strategies facilitate a continuous process improvement cycle.
- ***Integrity***- Courses exemplify the highest order of integrity in both student and faculty.

### **Two: *Instructor Readiness***

Effective facilitation of the TEC environment is a specialized form of teaching and learning with distinctive design and delivery characteristics and instructional strategy requirements. Superior TEC courses that foster dynamic and engaged learning explicitly address these fundamental design issues inherent to the context. While many tools and resources are available to provide a wide variety of design,

support, and consultation services, the instructor of record is responsible for the readiness, comprehensiveness, and appropriateness of the course content and activities.

### **Instructor Accountabilities**

*At a minimum, instructors of VCSU TEC courses will be expected to:*

#### **Plan**

- Meet all course development deadlines.
- Utilize expertise and resources available across campus as needed and put forth a good-faith effort to uphold (and expand) the tenets of the VCSU Design Philosophy.
- Create an environment of facilitation, creativity, and trust within the learning community.
- Follow copyright laws.
- State and adhere to instructor availability and response time.
- Provide students at least one communication avenue in addition to VCSU email, in order to nurture the faculty-student relationship.
- Customize the online environment to meet the course goals and objectives.

#### **Implement**

- Deliver course materials that provide evidence of the teaching and learning process, and are consistent with the standards of excellence outlined in this document.
- Provide learning activities that are of level, scope and scale appropriate to the course.
- Foster a student-centered active learning environment.
- Maintain weekly contact with all students.
- Establish an environment of professionalism, courtesy, and respect reflected in all communications.
- Adhere to course activity and assessment timelines and criteria as outlined in the course guide, while maintaining flexibility where appropriate.
- Advocate for student success, guiding students to additional support when needed.

#### **Evaluate**

- Facilitate and encourage a variety of formative evaluation opportunities.
- Implement assessments that accurately reflect student attainment of course goals and objectives.

#### **Reflect**

- Make a good faith effort to address issues raised.

### **Three: Evaluation**

To maintain a high standard of excellence, it is imperative that all instructors of TEC courses canvass students for feedback through both periodic progress checks and an end-of-term summative course evaluation. To comply with these standards, all TEC courses employ an informal end-of-course summative evaluation and at least one formative evaluation opportunity. The results of these informal evaluation efforts will be available only to the instructor to help guide future course improvements. *These evaluation efforts will not replace the formal evaluation process implemented in accordance with existing VCSU policy.*

Examples of TEC course evaluation include:

#### **Early Intervention: the Train Wreck Check**

The instructor or department chair may invite students to participate in an early (week two or three) formative evaluation via an email or survey form. This brief evaluation tool is used as an 'early intervention' to indicate (and facilitate correction of) any early course errors or missteps.

#### **Summative Evaluation**

Course designs should include a more in-depth end of term evaluation that is available to students over the last several days of the course. Although summative evaluation instruments can be tailored to meet the unique needs of the instructor, they should be designed specifically to reflect the instructor's success in achieving the Standards of Excellence.

#### **Ongoing Formative Evaluation**

Instructors are encouraged to provide multiple feedback opportunities throughout the semester to solicit student response and self-assess the effectiveness of the course. The Office of Instructional Design can provide examples and templates.

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