

# Northland Pioneer College



**Northland Pioneer College**

*Quality education you can afford.*

## **Distance Education Guidelines and Best Practices Fall 2010**

# Distance Education Guidelines and Best Practices

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## **Acknowledgments**

The Distance Education Guidelines and Best Practices document represents a collaborative effort among faculty, staff and administration. It reflects recommended current and future steps that should be followed to serve our students through distance education.

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## Introduction

### Northland Pioneer College Distance Learning

Northland Pioneer College (NPC) blazed new trails with distance learning in rural northeastern Arizona using interactive video and audio courses. By 2002, NPC Faculty, directed by an Internet Guidance Committee, added online instruction/learning to the College's distance learning programs.

The Learning Technologies Subcommittee was tasked with preparing a document outlining the guidelines and best practices for NPC's distance education program. The purpose of the document is to synthesize the many different directions that distance education has taken recently and to offer a clear vision of how to proceed. A driving force behind this committee's efforts is to insure that the Distance Education Program supports the educational mission of Northland Pioneer College.

The purpose of distance education at NPC is to provide high quality, student-centered, technologically-enhanced and/or delivered, post-secondary education that meets the needs of our students and communities. All distance education courses are taught by certified faculty, meeting the same high standards and prerequisites as their face-to-face, on-campus counterparts. All NPC policies and procedures for face-to-face, on-campus courses and programs are applicable to distance education programs. Policies and procedures specific to distance education programs may be proposed, reviewed, adapted, adopted, and implemented, as deemed necessary. Such policies and procedures will meet NPC's high standards, and no such policies and procedures will be counter to existing policies and procedures.

The goals of distance education at NPC are to:

1. Create and maintain courses that meet the academic rigor and standards of courses delivered on-site.
2. Develop and maintain an efficient support system for providing technical help services to all involved in distance education.
3. Encourage and reward innovation while maintaining consistently high standards.
4. Provide ongoing student support services for distance education students.

### Definitions

**Distance Education:** In the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, Congress defines distance learning as the "use of one or more technologies to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor, either synchronously or asynchronously." Distance learning includes interactive video courses, interactive audio courses, web-enhanced or web-assisted courses, blended or hybrid courses, and online courses.

**On-Line Courses:** Online courses are courses which deliver most or all of the content online. Students are normally separated from the instructor, and these courses typically have no face-to-face meetings. At a minimum, online courses have two technology requirements: a) access to

a computer meeting minimum standards to operate software required by each course and b) Internet access. Individual courses may require access to additional technologies; these requirements will be stated clearly in the course syllabus and the information made available to students prior to the first day of class.

Hybrid Courses: Hybrid courses blend online and face-to-face delivery. Hybrid courses deliver a substantial proportion of the content online, typically use online discussions, and have a reduced number of face-to-face meetings.

Web-enhanced or Web-assisted Courses: Web-enhanced, also known as Web-assisted courses, use web-based technology to facilitate what is essentially a face-to-face course. All class meetings occur in the face-to-face format. These courses may utilize a course/learning management system (CMS/LMS) or web pages to post the syllabus, assignments, and course handouts. These courses may also utilize external websites for a variety of course-related purposes.

Traditional or Face to Face: These courses are delivered with or without utilization of instructional technology and internet access. Students and instructors meet regularly in a physical location for synchronous instruction.

Interactive Video Conference (IVC) Courses: IVC courses allow communication with remote sites of the class via two-way video and audio systems. All class meetings are conducted via the IVC system(s).

Interactive Audio (IA) Courses: IA courses allow communication with remote sites of the class via two-way audio systems. These courses are enhanced by the use of smart/white boards. All class meetings are conducted via the IA system(s).

Synchronous: Synchronous refers to activities that the learner does in real time, either alone or with other class participants and/or instructor(s).

Asynchronous: Asynchronous refers to student-centered, instructional methods which allow access to online resources and which facilitate information sharing spanning the boundaries of time and distance, making it possible for learners to work independently or collaboratively with peers and instructors without the need for all parties to be in the same place at the same time.

Virtual Campus: NPC is currently a college of multiple campuses, and as NPC develops more fully online courses and seeks to offer a seamless online student service center, this committee offers a definition of the virtual campus to be considered in NPC's future discussions of Distance Education Guidelines and Best Practices. A virtual campus is a campus environment in which learners, faculty and institutional administrative and technical staff mainly 'meet' or communicate through technological connections or links, sometimes using other open and distance learning approaches for students who are on campus, as well as those away from it. NPC's Virtual Campus will be a place where a considerable amount of and integrated use of distance education occurs, encompassing online offerings and support services, and created by the convergence of new, powerful instruction and communication technologies.

Virtual Learning Environment (VLE): A virtual learning environment (VLE is a software system designed to support teaching and learning.

Accessibility: Section 508, W3C, and WCAG:

"In 1998 the US Congress amended the Rehabilitation Act to require Federal agencies to make their electronic and information technology accessible to people with disabilities. Section 508 was enacted to eliminate barriers in information technology, to make available new opportunities for people with disabilities, and to encourage development of technologies that will help achieve these goals." (<http://www.w3.org/WAI/intro/accessibility>)

"An (X)HTML document that conforms to an (X)HTML specification is said to be valid. A document can be checked for validity with the W3C Markup Validation Service." (<http://www.w3.org/WAI/intro/accessibility>)

"Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) are part of a series of Web accessibility guidelines published by the W3C's Web Accessibility Initiative. They consist of a set of guidelines on making content accessible, primarily for disabled users, but also for all user agents, including highly limited devices, such as mobile phones." (<http://www.w3.org/WAI/intro/accessibility>)

## **Recommended Institutional Responsibilities**

### **NPC Issued Student Email**

A student's NPC issued email address is the official form of contact from NPC to that student. All college information regarding the student's status with NPC will be sent to that account.

Discretion regarding required usage of students' NPC issued email accounts for classroom work and for contact with the instructor remains solely with individual faculty members. Effective fall 2010, all instructors will clearly indicate on each course syllabus which email account students may utilize for participation in any given course. If instructors choose to make it mandatory for students to use their NPC issued email accounts for course purposes, a statement to this effect will be noted prominently in the syllabus for each course to which the requirement applies.

### **Online Enrollment and Registration**

NPC will institute a 100% online enrollment and registration system by fall semester 2010. This system will allow students to enroll, obtain a student ID and NPC email address, pay tuition, purchase textbooks, and register for classes online.

### **Looking to the future**

The Faculty in Educational Technology will present a comprehensive vision for NPC's distance education program to the Instructional Council (IC) by spring semester 2011. The vision will address various aspects of technology, such as:

1. The role and recommended use of existing and emerging desktop conferencing solutions as distance education tools;
2. A thorough review and recommendation for use of existing and emerging distance learning platforms;
3. Expanding NPC's ability to adapt to emerging trends in learning by examining Web 2.0 technologies, audio and video communication, and social media tools;
4. Recommendation for the installation and use of electronic document software and other technologies that may affect general workflow and distance learning.

These technologies, when feasible, should be supported in-house rather than supported by external contractors.

### **Distance Education Workshop**

A series of workshops geared for teachers wishing to enhance their skills in distance education will be developed by the Faculty in Educational Technology in collaboration with other NPC faculty members. These workshops will be offered by spring semester 2011. The workshops will initially be available to NPC faculty and instructors. In future semesters the workshops will be available as well as faculty and instructors at other institutions in the college service area. The workshops will encourage and facilitate a broad exchange of ideas and will improve our ability to network with teachers in the communities we serve.

### **Student Readiness**

Distance learners will be offered an orientation to distance learning. This orientation module will be developed by the Faculty in Educational Technology in collaboration with other faculty members and will be in place by the fall 2011 semester. It is further suggested that IS personnel participate in module development, since IS supports both the student learners and the faculty, and having an interchange of ideas and insights from all perspectives will ultimately be beneficial to the distance teaching and learning process. The orientation module will be available to all faculty using technology for distance learning and it will be mandatory that all faculty teaching on-line, web-enhanced, or hybrid courses utilize relevant portions of the module in the introductory section of their course.

### **Instructor Readiness**

Instructors who want to enhance their teaching skills in teaching distance education courses will be able to take workshops geared for this purpose.

Faculty members who wish to design, develop, and deliver online and hybrid courses should satisfy one or more of the following readiness requirements:

- Formal coursework or workshops completed in designing, developing and teaching (delivering) distance education courses, including any workshops on distance learning provided by the Faculty in Educational Technology. Workshops or coursework must include an accessibility component to meet the readiness requirement;



- Demonstrated success in developing and teaching courses in a distance learning environment, defined as developed courses meeting the Quality Matters rubric standard upon review by the Learning Technology Subcommittee and approval by the relevant dean to teach in a distance learning environment.

### **Instructor Support**

NPC will provide resources that allow distance educators to design, develop and maintain distance education courses and to keep their distance education courses technologically current with state of the art advances in online course delivery. These resources will include:

- Faculty in Educational Technology;
- Help desk personnel;
- IS technicians;
- Workshops developed by the Faculty in Educational Technology and other faculty members, dynamic in nature and constantly being updated and revised will be in place by spring 2011 semester;
- Computer labs at each of the campuses and centers with appropriate hardware, software, and networking capabilities to enable instructors to use online learning systems in their classes will be in place by spring 2011 semester. The the appropriate dean and affected department chair(s) will work in concert to accomplish this stated goal; and,
- Library testing services.
- An electronic resource center, developed and maintained by the Faculty in Educational Technology, that addresses the theory and practice of effective distance learning pedagogy and instructional design/development

### **Curriculum Approval Process**

All courses delivered at NPC will provide the highest quality learning opportunities for students, regardless of course delivery modality. Since the course curriculum and learning objectives of distance education courses are the same as their face-to-face counterparts, the course approval process will follow the standard guidelines set by the Instructional Council with the following exceptions.

All distance education courses will be designed under close consultation with the appropriate department chair, division dean and the Faculty in Educational Technology. However, the appropriate department chair and division dean will review, as with all academic courses, the justification and overall need of offering the distance education course.

All online courses must fully meet the Quality Matters rubric standards, as noted in the most current version of the Quality Matters evaluation piece.

All online courses must go through the following approval process before reaching the Instructional Council for final approval.

- The appropriate department chair and division dean will review, as with all academic courses, the justification and overall need of offering the online course.
- A 3035 form for the proposed course will be approved by the Division Dean and forwarded to IC. Assuming the course is approved by IC, then development of the online course utilizing the Quality Matters rubric may begin.
- The prospective designer/developer will demonstrate professional fitness to the appropriate chair and division dean to design, develop and deliver the course online by satisfying one or more of the requirements as listed in the *Instructor Readiness* section of this document.
- The designer/developer will use the guidelines in the Quality Matters rubric to insure high quality content and effective instruction. The QM rubric serves two purposes:
  - 1) serves as a guide for designers/developers as they create their online courses;
  - 2) serves as an assessment tool for use by the Learning Technology Subcommittee
- Instructors will be responsible for content just as they are in face-to-face courses. The approval of course content will be a collaborative process within the specific department for which the course is being designed and developed.
- Once the course has been completed by the designer/developer, that person will then demonstrate the workings of the course to the Learning Technology Subcommittee. Again, the Quality Matters evaluation rubric will be the instrument used by this committee.
- The workflow of the online course development and evaluation process using Quality Matters will be as follows:
  1. The instructor will start with self evaluation using the QM-based evaluation worksheet (see attachment) and make final revisions if necessary;
  2. The instructor will submit the course design (syllabus and the URL to the fully-developed course site) to the Learning Technology Subcommittee (LTC) and Faculty in Educational Technology (FET) via email;
  3. An evaluation team consisting of the FET and two experienced online instructors; designated by LTC will review the course and assign points using the QM-based evaluation worksheet;
  4. An average score of 72 pts (or 85%) must be achieved to meet quality standards;
  5. If the quality standards are not met, recommendations will be made by the evaluation team to help the instructor improve the course;
  6. The FET will set a schedule to work with the instructor to make improvement accordingly;
  7. Repeat 1-4 as needed
- After receiving a favorable recommendation by the Learning Technology Subcommittee, the last step in this process is final approval by IC for online offering of the course.

## **Course Management Software Standard**

Course management software platforms to be used in delivering online and hybrid courses include all college supported web-based and other learning systems. For a complete list of the currently supported college learning systems, contact the Faculty in Educational Technology.

## **Intellectual Property Rights**

Distance education course development and teaching will adhere to the college's current intellectual property rights procedure (Procedure 2140).

## **Facilities and Finances**

NPC will possess the technical infrastructure and expertise required to offer distance education. The College's short- and long-term planning for viable and effective distance education will reflect adequate budgeting scenarios and shared governance decision-making procedures.

# **Recommended Faculty Responsibilities**

## **Best Practices for Teaching Distance Education Courses**

The guiding force behind a high quality distance education program is solid and consistent course content and objectives delivered by highly trained and competent faculty. The following list of best practices for teaching distance education courses will be adhered to by all faculty members:

- Faculty members will obtain adequate skill sets to conduct effective and high quality online classes. (See Instructor Readiness Requirements.)
- The online course content and objectives will be equal to the face-to-face courses. Course content, course objectives and assessment of learning outcomes will be outlined in the course syllabus.
- Faculty members will be available and respond to students in a timely manner in a reasonable timeframe. This timeframe will be determined by the instructor, department chair, and dean, and communicated to the student via the course syllabus.
- Faculty members will use college supported web-based learning systems, as well as related hardware (such as multifunction printers) for sending assignments, quizzes, take-home tests, handouts, etc., back and forth, whenever possible.
- All distance courses will be highly accessible, as measured by W3C validity, Section 508 compliance, and improving adherence to the WCAG.

- All copyright laws will be adhered to by distance education instructors.
- All course management logistics, such as log-in information, course rosters, etc., will be coordinated with the Faculty in Educational Technology and Information Services staff as needed.
- Because regular face-to-face contact between students and the teacher does not usually occur in distance education, detailed information must be provided to students related to the course content, methods of evaluation, deadlines, expectations, instructor contact information, netiquette, consequences of plagiarism, etc. This information must be provided in the course materials.

## **Recommended Student Support Services**

- IS will provide a fully-featured web conferencing technology for conducting synchronous office hours for online students and instructors by spring semester 2011.
- Distance learners need to have equal access to informational, advising, research, counseling, registration, and business office-related resources as do on-site students. Online Student Services will include but not be limited to the following areas:
  1. Admissions and Records
  2. Course/Instructional Assessment
  3. Bookstore
  4. Business Office Services (online)
  5. Campus security
  6. Counseling
  7. ADA Compliant and Disability Resources
  8. Financial aid and scholarships
  9. Library
  10. Online security
  11. Orientation
  12. Registration
  13. Student government
  14. Technology help desk
  15. Testing services
  16. Tutorial center
  17. Veteran's services

- Distance learner orientation module developed by the Faculty in Educational Technology in collaboration with other faculty members will be in place by fall 2011.
- The Vice President of Learning and Student Services will establish an early warning system that will identify distance education students having either technical or academic challenges. This system will be effective by fall semester 2011.
- The Vice President of Learning and Student Services will establish a system for tracking retention rates for all distance education courses. This system will be in effect by fall semester 2011.

## **Recommended Evaluation and Assessment of Distance Education Courses**

### **General Guidelines for Evaluating Distance Education Courses**

Like on-site courses, distance education courses need to be evaluated periodically by peers and students. Online and hybrid courses will be evaluated for content and student achievement in a manner consistent with the evaluation of on-site courses. Online and hybrid courses also require a review for design and technical standards on a regular basis, given the evolving nature of learning and information technology. The Faculty in Educational Technology, in cooperation with the Learning Technologies Subcommittee, will review each online/hybrid course on a five year review cycle. The process of evaluation and improvement (if needed) will be identical to the review process for a new online or hybrid course.

### **Online Evaluation Method**

The student online course evaluation tool already in place should be used as an integral part of the evaluation process of online courses. Instructional Council recommends the continued evaluation of online student course evaluation for all NPC courses.