



GRADUATE PROGRAMS

**Explanation of Evaluation Form
Online Course Observations**

Before beginning your evaluation, be sure to collect the Instructor Input Form from the faculty member whose online course you are planning to observe. The information provided by the faculty member will help orient you to the Canvas site being used for the course you are observing.

The evaluation process for online courses is much the same as it would be for a classroom visit. The evaluator should be familiar with the course syllabus and plan to spend about an hour observing in the course before completing the evaluation form. You are not required to observe or be a part of a synchronous session and therefore, may complete your evaluation at a time that best suits your schedule. The evaluation should be completed as close to the end of the course as possible.

The evaluator is asked to note strengths and areas needing improvement in six distinct areas. This explanation document provides expectations and best practices for online courses for each of the six categories. In addition, the description under each category identifies ways in which these standards may be observed in an online course. The examples that are given are in no way meant to be comprehensive nor are they expected to appear in their entirety in any one online course (unless otherwise noted). The information has been provided as a guide, a means of directing the evaluator to areas of the course that are likely to contain evidence of the characteristic being evaluated.

This explanation document is intended to be used as a guide or reference. Unless otherwise noted, you are not required to address every point and sub-point listed in the following pages. Your personal observations should be recorded on the blank form, and only the form with your comments on it needs to be returned upon completion.

EXAMPLES FOR ONLINE COURSE OBSERVATIONS
(Please note strengths and areas needing improvement)

1. Online Course Requirements (all sub-points must be reviewed)

- a. **Syllabus:** Does the syllabus contain all the required elements (*Community of Educators Handbook* Section 10.14): Course title, number, section, dates, and semester/year; faculty contact information and availability; expectations of students; course description; course objectives; textbooks/materials required; course requirements; grading policy; course policies (late assignments, make up exams, etc.); academic integrity policy; ADA statement; library information; minimum technology requirements; minimum computer skills required; technical support for students; statement of copyright protection; statement of confidentiality; course outline/schedule; chart indicated instructional and non-instructional hours for online courses? (All of these elements must be present in the syllabus).
- b. **Syllabus:** Is the syllabus posted in PDF form?
- c. **Introduction:** Does the faculty member welcome students to the course, introduce himself/herself to the students (video, PowerPoint, letter, announcement, first forum) and provide the students an opportunity to introduce themselves to each other?
- d. **Calendar:** Does the faculty member provide a schedule or calendar that lists specific dates for assignments, forums, exams, etc.?

2. Knowledge and Communication of Subject Matter

- a. Appropriate course content: Does the course content match the course description? Does the course content align with real-life situations for the students?
- b. Connected course objectives: Are the course objectives clearly stated and connected to course assignments and activities?
- c. Knowledgeable instructor: Is the faculty member knowledgeable in the subject matter?
- d. Varied methods: Does the faculty member use a variety of methods to communicate material?
- e. Appropriate course rigor: Best practice communicates high expectations.* *“Expect more and you will get it. High expectations are important for everyone – for the poorly prepared, for those unwilling to exert themselves, and for the bright and well-motivated. Expecting students to perform well becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.”*
 - (1) Ways you may be able to observe this best practice occurring in an online course:
 - (a) Communication: Has the faculty member articulated the knowledge and skills a student will need in order to be successful in the course?
 - (b) Learning objectives: Does the syllabus list the objectives of the course and do the assignments demonstrate how they will help the student achieve those objectives?
 - (c) Discussion forums: Do the expectations for forum posts require students to support their positions and statements with primary resources. “Good posts” will likely require outside reading, comprehension of the gathered information, and the ability to condense key thoughts into a stated word count limit.
 - (d) Journals/reflective writing: Does the faculty member provide probing questions that require students to think critically, integrate their learning, and write reflectively on the topic? This may be private or public and be evident in journals, reflective writing papers, or within some of the discussion forums.
 - (e) Provide Examples: Does the faculty member provide samples of both extraordinary and below average student work to help demonstrate or motivate students to pursue excellence?
 - (f) Public Feedback: Does the faculty member call attention to student work that exceeds the standards and explain why it does? Providing feedback to the group as a whole can also help motivate students.
 - (g) Shared Student Work: Are students asked to present their work in any facet (e.g. verbal presentation, visual presentation, video presentation, resource sharing, peer-editing, e-portfolios or blogging)? Students who know they need to share their work with classmates are more likely to work a little harder on the end product.

3. Preparedness and Organization of Class Sessions

- a. Course homepage: Does the course homepage contains the essential elements: course information (course name, number, section, semester/year and specific course dates); instructions on how to gain access to or communicate with the faculty member (phone, email, text, chat, messages); a link to student technology support; a copyright protection statement; a refined tool menu with an explanation of how each tool will be used by that faculty member (i.e. has the faculty member removed the tools from the tool menu that he/she will not be using in the course)? Is the overall look of the homepage inviting and professional?
- b. Course organization and presentation: Is the course layout well organized and redundant (provides students more than one way to access important information); are the course materials presented in a logical and consistent order; are instructions clearly communicated to students; are grading criteria/grading rubrics provided in advance of the deadline; and do all links, documents, and media sources function properly?

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- c. **Best practice emphasizes time on task.** *“Time plus energy equals learning. Learning to use one’s time well is critical for students and professionals alike. Allocating realistic amounts of time means effective learning for students and effective teaching for faculty.”*
- (1) Ways you may be able to observe this best practice occurring in an online course:
- Course Schedule: Does the syllabus include a course outline which details what topics will be covered and when corresponding assignments are due? Is there evidence that the faculty member is following the published schedule?
 - Announcements: Does the faculty member post an announcement about assignments and their due dates or next week-at-a-glance overviews?
 - Assignments: When appropriate, are large semester-long assignments broken down into smaller portions of the whole? Are there “check points” along the way or suggested strategies to help the students manage their time in order to complete a larger project?
 - Time Estimates: Does the syllabus indicate the average amount of time a student should spend on the course? Do the individual assignments indicate time-to-completion?
 - Electronic Resources: Are links provided to electronic resources where appropriate? Are there links to the library from Canvas?

4. Sensitivity to Student Comprehension, Comments and Questions

- a. **Best Practice encourages contact between students and faculty.** *“Frequent student-faculty contact in and out of the class is a most important factor in student motivation and involvement. Faculty concern helps students get through rough times and keep on working. Knowing a few faculty members well enhances students’ intellectual commitment and encourages them to think about their own values and plans.”*
- (1) Ways you may be able to observe this best practice occurring in an online course:
- Welcome Message: Does the faculty member provide a letter, PowerPoint, video, etc. that introduces students to the course?
 - Faculty Availability Statement: Do some any of the initial paragraphs on the course syllabus specifically state how students are able to contact the faculty member (email, cell phone, Skype, Digital Samba, virtual office hours) and when the student can expect a response from the faculty member (within 24 hours, except on Sundays, daily between 8:00 am – 10:00 pm)?
 - Announcements: Does the faculty member provide announcements to the students in a consistent and regular way (posting or emailing) (summary of the week’s assignments)
 - Forums: Does the faculty member provide an open forum session for icebreakers, student introductions, questions and answers, discussion of netiquette rules?
 - Discussion Forums: Does the faculty member contribute regularly to the forum without dominating the discussion?
 - Class Questions Forum: Does the faculty member provide a public avenue for the students to post course questions so that all class members can benefit from the response?
 - Student Inquiries: Does the faculty member respond to a student’s inquiry (email, phone, messaging tool) in a timely manner (i.e. in accordance with the faculty availability paragraph)?
 - Synchronous Meetings: Does the faculty member schedule synchronous sessions during the course and/or encourage students to meet synchronously in study or work groups?
- b. **Best practice gives prompt feedback.** *“Knowing what you know and don’t know focuses your learning. In getting started, students need help in assessing their existing knowledge and*

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competence. Then, in classes, students need frequent opportunities to perform and receive feedback on their performance. At various points during college, and at its end, students need chances to reflect on what they have learned, what they still need to know, and how they might assess themselves."

- (1) Ways you may be able to observe this best practice occurring in an online course
 - (a) Adherence to Faculty Availability Statement: Does the faculty member have clear and appropriate standards for response time communicated in the "faculty availability statement" paragraph in syllabus. Does the faculty member adhere to or exceed these standards providing complete, timely, and friendly feedback?
 - (b) Daily Interaction: Does the faculty member provide daily interaction, even if it a brief response to let the student know when a more detailed response can be expected?
 - (c) Forums: Does the faculty member provide a public avenue for the students to post course questions so they can receive feedback quickly either from the faculty member or other classmates?
 - (d) Rubrics: Does the faculty member post rubrics or make them available to students before they begin working on the assignment? Is the grading criteria clearly communicated for each individual assignment?
 - (e) Returned Assignments: Does the faculty member provide feedback that is clear, specific, actionable, and meaningful?
 - (f) Peer Involvement: Does the faculty member employ peer editing, critiques, or evaluation as an additional means of getting prompt feedback to the student?
 - (g) Accessible Gradebook: Does the faculty member list all graded components of the course in the Gradebook in an organized manner? Has the faculty member released the Gradebook items to the students?

5. Appropriateness and Effectiveness of Instructional Method

- a. Best practice respects diverse talents and ways of learning.* *"Many roads lead to learning. Different students bring different talents and styles to college. Brilliant students in a seminar might be all thumbs in a lab or studio; students rich in hands-on experience may not do so well with theory. Students need opportunities to show their talents and learn in ways that work for them. Then they can be pushed to learn in new ways that do not come so easily."*

- (1) Ways you may be able to observe this best practice occurring in an online course
 - (a) Assessing with Variety: Does the course contain various assessment tools that help gauge the student's progress?
 - (b) Supplemental Materials: Does the faculty member suggest or provide additional resources for students who may lack prerequisite knowledge or benefit from presentation of the material in an alternate format?
 - (c) Assignment Options: When possible, does the faculty member allow students to adjust assignments to demonstrate their progress in a manner that is conducive to their specific learning styles and/or their specific needs?
 - (d) Accommodations: Does the syllabus provide instructions for students who need to secure accommodations to succeed in the course?

6. Stimulation of Interest and Enthusiasm Among Students

- a. Best practice develops reciprocity and cooperation among students.* *"Learning is enhanced when it is more like a team effort than a solo race. Good learning, like good work, is collaborative and social, not competitive and isolated. Working with others often increases involvement in learning. Sharing one's ideas and responding to others' improves thinking and deepens understanding."*

- (1) Ways you may be able to observe this best practice occurring in an online course

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- (a) Discussion Forums: Does the faculty member require thoughtful responses to classmates' posts, and by demonstration, encourage students to think and respond critically to the topics and statements being discussed on the forum thread?
 - (b) Assignments: Has the faculty member designed assignments so that students participate in the creation, discovery, compilation and communication of material? This could be evidenced through group projects, presentations, role plays, interviews, videos, peer evaluations/feedback, wikis
 - (c) Study Groups: Are students encouraged to work together in study groups to further synthesize the information presented in class and to better prepare for course exams or final projects/assignments? Are the students permitted to work with the professor to fine-tune assignments so that they are specific to the student's needs?
- b. Best practice encourages active learning. **Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just sitting in classes listening to teachers, memorizing prepackaged assignments, and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write reflectively about it, relate it to past experiences, and apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves.*"
- (1) Ways you may be able to observe this best practice occurring in an online course
- (a) Discussion Forums: Do the faculty member's expectations for forum posts require students to 1) support their positions and statements with primary resources, rather than personal opinions alone, and 2) specify the maximum number of words per post? A "good" response will likely require outside reading, comprehension of the gathered information, and the ability to condense key thoughts into a stated word count limit.
 - (b) Assignments: Are the assignments dynamic and interactive and provide for collaborative learning as well as independent discovery? Are students at times asked to share their work by way of a presentation (PowerPoint, oral report, video, etc.)?
 - (c) Applying the Material: Are students permitted to adapt their assignments and projects (when appropriate) to fit their specific interests or field of study? Do students take part in some kind of hands-on activity that allows them to experience the reality of what they are studying first hand?

7. Comments and Recommendations

List any additional comments or recommendations you may have.

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