CDE Quality Improvement Program
Guidelines & Procedures:
Semester Based, Online Courses
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Introduction** ................................................................................................................................. 3  
**Guidelines** ........................................................................................................................................ 4  
  *Communication* .................................................................................................................................. 4  
  *Email and Office Hours* ....................................................................................................................... 4  
  *Making Contact* ................................................................................................................................. 4  
  *First Content Assignment* ............................................................................................................... 4  
  *Response Time: Lesson Grading* ........................................................................................................ 5  
  *Response Time: Other Communication* ............................................................................................. 5  
  *Pre-Requisite Enforcement* ............................................................................................................... 5  
**Grading** .................................................................................................................................................. 5  
  *Lesson Submissions* .......................................................................................................................... 5  
  *Maintenance of Grade Books* ............................................................................................................ 6  
  *NB Grades* .......................................................................................................................................... 6  
  *Instructor Withdrawals* ..................................................................................................................... 6  
  *Incompletes* ......................................................................................................................................... 6  
  *Absences and Resignation* .................................................................................................................. 7  
    *Planned Absences* ............................................................................................................................ 7  
    *Resignation* ..................................................................................................................................... 7  
**Enforcement** ......................................................................................................................................... 8  
**Academic Oversight** ............................................................................................................................ 9  
**Procedures** .......................................................................................................................................... 10  
  *Course Improvement* ....................................................................................................................... 10  
    *Awareness* ...................................................................................................................................... 10  
    *Policy Violations* ............................................................................................................................ 10  
    *The Course Improvement Cycle* ................................................................................................... 11  
    *Roles and Responsibilities* ............................................................................................................. 12  
  *Classroom and Course Assessment* .................................................................................................. 13  
    *Classroom Assessment* .................................................................................................................. 13  
    *End-of-Course Evaluation* .............................................................................................................. 13  
    *Exit Surveys* .................................................................................................................................... 13  
  *Instructor Development and Support* ............................................................................................... 13  
    *Instructor Survey* ........................................................................................................................... 14  
    *iTeach and Technology Training* .................................................................................................. 14  
    *Supported Lab Time* ....................................................................................................................... 14  
  *Future Activities* .................................................................................................................................. 14  
    *Short Term (1-3 Months)* ............................................................................................................... 14  
    *Medium Term (3-9 months)* ........................................................................................................... 14  
    *Long Term (9-18 months)* .............................................................................................................. 15
INTRODUCTION

Student success is a cornerstone of UAF’s mission. For CDE, student success is founded on four essential elements:

1. academically excellent content
2. pedagogically-sound, innovative course design
3. active course management and student services
4. well-supported, engaged instructors.

Further, the nature of distance education requires an instructor who not only assesses student progress but can facilitate, guide and mentor students over significant geographic distance. In support of these goals, CDE has established the following guidelines and procedures for CDE instructors.
GUIDELINES

Guidelines establish responsibilities and standards for instructors who teach for CDE.

COMMUNICATION

EMAIL AND OFFICE HOURS

Instructors provide e-mail contact information to their students and to respond to student inquiries according to established guidelines.

CDE strongly recommend regularly scheduled, posted, synchronous office hours when students can communicate with their instructor via phone, chat, Skype, or other real-time tool. The CDE Design Team can assist in establishing an environment for office hours that is most suitable to the instructor’s needs.

MAKING CONTACT

Students who begin work on their distance course in the first two weeks of the semester are more likely to complete the course successfully. In addition to simply ‘setting the tone’ for the course and its attendant obligations, there are many minor problems that, if dealt with immediately, can allow a student to succeed who might otherwise fail. It is very helpful if this is an assignment that is completed in the course management system (such as Blackboard) rather than only personally documented as a communication privately between student and instructor in order that the CDE Design Team has a metric to consider for course improvement should it be necessary in the future.

Courses begin with an initial assignment the student completes within the first two weeks of the semester. This is an opportunity to establish contact and allow the student to accept responsibility for class obligations. The content of this assignment is up to the instructor—it could be course content curriculum or, as historically has been the case, simply a means of establishing contact. Initial assignments of the latter type could include:

- posting an introduction on the discussion forum
- posting a student web page
- completing a quiz covering details of the syllabus
- completing a "learning contract" or study plan
- email contact and response with an accompanying grade book entry

FIRST CONTENT ASSIGNMENT

Students must progress through a course in a timely manner. Courses will have a required content assignment within the first three weeks of the semester.

Guidelines for completion of the first assignment should be made clear in the course syllabus, a course announcement, and any other “welcome” material that is distributed to students. An example simple policy boilerplate might be used: “Failure to submit the assignment by the deadline could result in withdrawal from the course.” The requirement for this lesson and the consequences for not completing it are included in the CDE welcome letter to students to encourage them to sign into Blackboard and begin accessing the course as soon as possible. CDE also encourages instructors to create a personal welcome letter that is distributed with course texts and other materials.
RESPONSE TIME: LESSON GRADING

Instructors are expected to grade student work in a regular and timely fashion.

- Lessons without a stated submission deadline are graded with grades posted within seven days of submission.
- Lessons with a weekly submission deadline are graded and those grades posted within seven days of the deadline.

Weekly deadlines provide the instructor with pedagogical benefits of grading at a regularly scheduled time each week. This allows the instructor to evaluate all student work on a given lesson, noting parallels and contrasts. By grading on a weekly basis, the instructor may notice common misunderstandings and address these topics through discussion or announcement posts.

Students sometimes work far ahead of a course schedule. This is an example of a reasonable case for exceeding the expected grading timelines.

Grading policies, including the turnaround time, are clearly stated in the syllabus.

RESPONSE TIME: OTHER COMMUNICATION

Student requests for help can be addressed more quickly than routine lesson submittals. Research indicates best practice has instructors respond to student e-mail requests or phone queries within 48 hours, and preferably within 24 hours. Preferred methods for contact, including the required instructor email address, and synchronous office hours (if applicable) will be stated in the syllabus.

If desired, instructors may include a backup policy instructing students to contact CDE if the expected timeline is not being met.

PRE-REQUISITE ENFORCEMENT

Students should not be enrolled in courses for which they aren't adequately prepared. The Banner registration system doesn't currently enforce pre-requisites outside of core courses. Therefore:

1. Instructor's can use UAOnline to check and enforce pre-requisite requirements in those courses. If an instructor is unclear if their course has automatic checks, they can contact the CDE Registrar.
2. Within the first week of class, instructors should ensure that students meet pre-requisite requirements and administratively withdraw those who do not:
   - Overriding pre-requisite requirements—whether enforced by Banner registration or not—is a conscious, considered decision that includes a recorded communication between the instructor and student (copied to the CDE Faculty Liaison) in which the student accepts the responsibility of taking that course.

CDE will maintain a published list of all courses having pre-requisites and which are enforced by the Banner system along with instructions for performing pre-requisite checks using UAOnline.

GRADING

LESSON SUBMISSIONS

Email lesson submission has proven to be problematic in many courses. Homework assignments, papers, and other graded lessons that have an artifact of some kind are to be submitted and graded using the assignment type in Blackboard.
Many assessed student activities and interactions will not include a discrete transmitted item (for example: cumulative participation activities such as discussion board or blog posts) and thus the assignment feature is irrelevant, but for those that do, grades for those activities are maintained in the grade book.

### MAINTENANCE OF GRADE BOOKS

Instructors in online courses are expected to maintain a current grade book in the course management system that accurately reflects their grading activity in accordance with established response time guidelines and provide a method for students to view their own current grades. Passive grading, assessment and communication engaged only in response to student-initiated actions are not considered best practice for distance learning.

### NB GRADES

By UAF Faculty Senate definition, the NB grade is intended for situations where a student has submitted little or no work and no longer has contact with the instructor—therefore the instructor has No Basis on which to assign a grade. There has been a tendency at CDE to overuse this grade, often by instructors who don’t want to assign a grade of F. Beginning in Fall 2009, CDE will assess use of the No Basis grade and address disproportionate use through course improvement.

NB grades, like Incomplete grades, are subject to departmental approval, so it follows that they will be granted according to department guidelines if such guidelines exist. NB is a useful option when used correctly. In addition to potentially being revoked by the University, misuse of the NB grade by CDE instructors may lead to placement of the course in the Course Improvement Cycle (see page 11).

### INSTRUCTOR WITHDRAWALS

In accordance with sound pedagogy and established communication guidelines, instructors will monitor their roster and contact students who are falling behind.

Instructor-initiated withdrawals provide an excellent opportunity to dialog with each student about progress in the course. There are three points at which students should be withdrawn:

1. Students who have not completed the mandatory contact assignment within the first two weeks of class
2. Students who have not completed the mandatory content assignment within the first three weeks of class
3. Students who have submitted less than three lessons by the deadline for instructor-initiated withdrawals

The withdrawal policy for each course is clearly communicated in the syllabus.

*Note: a strong withdrawal policy will virtually eliminate use of the NB grade.*

### INCOMPLETES

In the past, some instructors have granted incomplete grades without carefully adhering to UAF guidelines. The 2008-2009 catalog states (emphasis added):

An incomplete is a temporary grade used to indicate that the student has *satisfactorily completed (C or better) the majority of work in a course* but for personal reasons beyond the student’s control, such as sickness, has not been able to complete the course during the regular semester. Normally, an incomplete is assigned in a case when the student is *current in the class* until at least the last three weeks of the semester or summer session. *Negligence or indifference* is not an acceptable reason for an “I” grade.
An Incomplete, or “I” grade, should not be granted unless a student has satisfactorily completed the majority of work in the course and the instructor completes the UAF official Notice of Incomplete Grade form to inform the student about what is required. When an incomplete grade is assigned, it must be accompanied by a statement of required work and a deadline for completion. CDE strongly recommends a deadline of one month, and strongly discourage deadlines longer than three months. Incompletes are a privilege extended to students who demonstrate their willingness and ability to complete the course.

*CDE assesses Incomplete grade assignments by its instructors.* Continued unsatisfactory outcomes and/or disproportionate assignment of Incomplete grades may lead to placement of the course in the Course Improvement Cycle (see page 11).

ABSENCES AND RESIGNATION

**PLANNED ABSENCES**

Planned absences ("absence" in this case meaning a span of time during which grading and engagement with the course is not possible) of up to 10 days can be accommodated with two weeks or more notice:

- to the CDE Course Manager
- directly to all students via email
- as an announcement or notice in the Blackboard course

Absences of longer than 10 days are not permitted unless an accommodation can be reached with CDE to find a replacement instructor.

**RESIGNATION**

In order to find an appropriate replacement without disrupting the class, CDE must be informed of any intention to resign as instructor 30 days prior to the proposed effective date of resignation.
ENFORCEMENT

Instructors are responsible for course outcomes, which in turn contribute to decisions regarding continuation of that course and/or that instructor's employment with CDE. Depending on an evaluation of the situation—including historical performance, extenuating circumstances and willingness to work with CDE—instructors whose courses are not aligned with Quality Improvement Program guidelines participate in the Course Improvement Cycle, establishing a period to achieve the following outcomes:

- Sufficient improvement (success) and “release” of the course from the cycle
- Significant improvement and the start of another cycle
- Sufficient improvement and the start of another cycle based on new ideas for change
- Sufficient assessment of the instructor and/or removal of the course
ACADEMIC OVERSIGHT

CDE works cooperatively with UAF academic departments to offer quality courses. The departments retain academic oversight over the curriculum and the instructor of each CDE course. CDE courses are designed to meet the same standards and outcomes—and are subject to the same departmental review and curriculum approval process—as all other UAF courses. All courses meet the standards of UAF Student Learning Outcomes Assessment and program review requirements as established by accreditation standards, regardless of where, when or how any course is delivered.

CDE continually seeks to improve its relationship with departments and actively seek ways to engage with them more fully. At this time, development and teaching for CDE are subject to multiple approvals by the relevant department:

- Approval of the prospective course offering
- Approval of course developer(s) for initial development and revisions
- Approval of developed curriculum and materials and subsequent revisions
- Approval of course instructor(s) per department requirements (listed in the CRCD Red Book).

Each of these approvals is required or CDE does not complete the development/revision or offer the course. A department may, at any time, rescind their approval of a course, curriculum or instructor.
PROCEDURES

Procedures establish CDE’s responsibilities and activities as part of an active Quality Improvement Program.

COURSE IMPROVEMENT

CDE employs instructors committed to providing a realistic means for student success. The Course Improvement Cycle is intended to support instructors by creating a structure of shared expectations, explicit goals for improvement, and a comprehensible timeline for effecting necessary change in order to foster retention and academic success.

AWARENESS

Recognizing that CDE constantly strives to improve its offerings and outcomes, determining that a specific course needs particular attention can come about in a number of ways.

STATISTICAL ANALYSES: TERM OUTCOMES

CDE will gather the following standard semester-based statistics for all courses and use them to prioritize improvement activities:

- Absolute Success (Total A,B,C,P Grades): percentage breakdown, credit hours, head count
- Completions (Total A,B,C,D,F,P Grades): percentage breakdown, credit hours, head count
- Relative Success (Absolute Success/Completions): Percentage
- Incompletes (Total I): Percentage
- Withdrawals (Total W): Percentage
- No Basis (Total NB): Percentage

It’s difficult to determine absolute statistical levels for required improvement. Obviously, simple statistical measures vary based on population: a 50% completion rate in a class with 40 students means something quite different from a class with just 6 students. Further, there are a variety of circumstances beyond an instructor’s control in a particular semester—bookstore and materials delivery issues, technology problems inside and outside the university, the constantly changing demographics, abilities and motivations of class populations—that can adversely affect outcomes.

STATISTICAL ANALYSES: GRADING TIMELINESS

CDE will perform regular spot-checks of courses during the semester to evaluate timeliness. Instructors found to be out of compliance with established guidelines for response time will be mentored through the Course Improvement Cycle process.

STUDENT REPORTS AND CLASSROOM-ASSESSMENT

CDE will use classroom assessment activity results to determine classes which may be enrolled in the Course Improvement Cycle.

POLICY VIOLATIONS

Instructors who do not adhere to the philosophy of best practices as outlined in the Quality Improvement Program guidelines as agreed to in their contracts can be mentored through the Course Improvement Cycle.
THE COURSE IMPROVEMENT CYCLE

The responsibility of the course developer—in cooperation with CDE instructional designers—is to create pedagogically sound, well-organized course material. The instructor provides a teaching environment that promotes learning and student success. The role of the instructor is vital to a favorable learning outcome. CDE's takes an active role in insuring that all students benefit from superior instruction. To that end,

- instructors performance is reviewed as per Board of Regents policy
- CDE uses credible evaluation and review processes
- evaluation is formative rather than punitive, providing an opportunity for improvement
- course content and configuration is approved by the relevant academic unit

The Course Improvement Cycle is one means of course revision and improvement. CDE also provides support for routine revisions, both major and minor, in addition to this intervention process.

INFORMATION GATHERING AND ASSESSMENT

As a course is engaged in the Course Improvement Program, a file is opened for that particular intervention. CDE gathers information to adequately assess areas for improvement. This information includes comparison with historical performance statistics, analysis of grading timeliness, qualitative assessment of interactions and assessments, and student feedback on course instruction.

NOTIFICATION

The Course Improvement Team will contact the instructor to notify them that their course is being enrolled in the cycle, share their findings to that point, and plan a time for the instructor to review the information with the team members.

MEETING WITH INSTRUCTOR

CDE and its instructors share the same goals. Meetings are intended to clarify the problem(s) and agree on what is to be done. It may take multiple meetings to create the necessary products:

- agreement on the problem area(s)
- information and reflection by the instructor on their experience and how CDE can help them
- a collaborative agreement on what improvements are necessary
- a timeline for implementation and follow-up

IMPROVEMENT PLAN AND TIMELINE

The product of the meeting(s) between the instructor and the CDE staff taking part in the Course Improvement Cycle will be an individualized course improvement plan that documents:

- the specific changes being made in the course curriculum and/or delivery methods
- the obligations on the part of both instructor and various areas of CDE to implement those changes
- a benchmark timeline for points of implementation and assessment(s)
- agreed-upon times for further meetings and follow-up
- results for successful and unsuccessful improvements
IMPLEMENTATION

Each individual instructor and course involved in the Course Improvement Cycle will be assisted by a small CDE team (see Roles and Responsibilities) led by an identified single point of contact who will be responsible for oversight of the implementation process.

FOLLOW-UP AND OUTCOMES

Implementation of the Course Improvement Cycle will establish future meetings according to the needs of the improvement processes. Every Course Improvement Cycle includes at least one follow-up meeting to assess the implementation of improvements and student success.

Outcomes of the follow-up will work toward the following:

- Sufficient improvement (success) and “release” of the course from the cycle
- Significant improvement and the start of another cycle
- Sufficient improvement and the start of another cycle based on new ideas for change
- Sufficient assessment of the instructor and/or removal of the course

DURATION

The Course Improvement Cycle may span any agreed-upon length of time, though typically it will be a semester-based activity to allow for implementing changes in curriculum and delivery which can be evaluated to determine further action.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Each Course Improvement Cycle instance will include the instructor(s) and/or developer(s) of record and a small team from CDE representing the relevant and necessary skills and interests needed to effect the necessary improvements. Given the size of some CDE areas (some of which include just one or two members), it isn’t feasible that every Course Improvement Cycle instance include members from every area. Thus the roles are divided between reporting lines and functional teams.

REPORTING LINES

Reporting lines include CDE areas which must be kept informed of the progress of Course Improvement Cycle instances:

- Course Manager
- Faculty Liaison
- Design Team Manager

Through these reporting lines CDE Administration will be made aware of Course Improvement Cycle activities.

FUNCTIONAL TEAMS

Functional teams are those who are directly involved in the Course Improvement Cycle processes. This team will always include:

- instructional designers

Further members may include (or include representatives from):
The Faculty Liaison is purposefully excluded from the functional teams because his or her role is to be an advocate for faculty.

CLASSROOM AND COURSE ASSESSMENT

CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT

As part of CDE’s effort to establish proactive ongoing classroom assessment, the Design Team will work with instructors to implement short, required classroom assessment activities in all classes. Such activities may include, but are not limited to:

- embedded quick-polls regarding response time, instructor support and engagement, and other ongoing activities
- student reflection on content and instruction

Classroom assessment data and results will be shared with the instructor and used, in part, to determine course revision and improvement.

END-OF-COURSE EVALUATION

All courses will include a CDE end-of-course assessment as prescribed by UA Board of Regents, which evaluates:

- student satisfaction and effort
- course design and clarity
- instructor support and engagement

Evaluations will be shared with the instructor and used, in part, to determine course revision and improvement.

EXIT SURVEYS

In addition to those prompted by investigation of a course’s suitability for the Course Improvement Cycle, CDE will perform periodic exit surveys on a sampling of students who are unsuccessful in completing courses. This information will be used to define and shape future procedures and improvement activities.

INSTRUCTOR DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT

Superior learning is the work product of superior teachers. CDE is committed to providing training and development for its instructors—and advocating for their inclusion in training and development offered by UAF—in order to:

- implement sound pedagogy using current technology
- efficiently manage their classroom
- deliver their curriculum using a rich framework
- and assess learning actively and authentically.

Instructors engaged in this difficult and demanding form of teaching will be fully supported from the beginning of course development to the successful completion of their students.
INSTRUCTOR SURVEY

The Faculty Liaison to assess instructor needs for development and support through an annual survey of CDE instructors. This survey will include questions designed to create a baseline and subsequent measures of CDE instructors’ development, satisfaction, engagement with training opportunities and support needs.

ITEACH AND TECHNOLOGY TRAINING

CDE will conduct one iTeach clinic each year dedicated to CDE instructors. Where possible, CDE instructors will be included in additional iTeach training offerings.

When feasible, any time CDE provides or participates in other training activities, the training material or information derived will be explicitly shared with CDE instructors.

SUPPORTED LAB TIME

CDE will provide a minimum of four hours per month of supported lab time for its instructors. During this lab time, space and computers will be provided for instructors to work on their courses, with CDE instructional designers and student services personnel available to answer questions and provide assistance.

FUTURE ACTIVITIES

In addition to the CDE Quality Improvement Program in guidelines and procedures established above, CDE plans to implement a number of future activities as well, as funds and staffing permit.

SHORT TERM (1-3 MONTHS)

Instructor Community

In conjunction with iTeach and, potentially, future Distance Education Gateway activities, establish an online community where CDE instructors can reflect, share experiences, and collaborate.

Procedural Documentation

Create, publish and directly share support documentation for established Quality Improvement Program guidelines and procedures, including pre-requisite checking and processing instructor withdrawals.

Curriculum Examples

Provide curriculum examples in support of policy requirements, including first contact and first content assignments.

MEDIUM TERM (3-9 MONTHS)

Faculty Spotlight and Incentive

Create an ongoing recognition and incentive program for CDE instructors.

Training Sessions

Implement an ongoing series of training sessions focused on topics useful to CDE instructors. These sessions will be open to anyone who is interested and will be archived for future use.

Faculty Orientation Kit

Produce a collection of resources for new faculty orienting them to teaching online, and to CDE guidelines, procedures, and policies.
Course Recommendations

Build a resource that provides course recommendations for current, potential and former students. Recommendations could include “If you took X, you might be interested in Y” and curriculum matching recommenders.

Course Sneak Peeks

Construct “sneak peek” previews of courses to help students make better choices.

LONG TERM (9-18 MONTHS)

Course Groups and/or Clusters

Implement paired, collaborative, or parallel courses groups/clusters. For instance, many core courses lend themselves well to this approach, such as HIST 100X and ECON 100X.

Faculty Advisory Group

Form a faculty advisory group to work with—and provide feedback to—the Faculty Liaison, Course Manager and Design Team, potentially becoming a source for peer-review and mentor activities.