Quality Education for Non-Traditional Students
Processes and Practices at the Center for Distance Education
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ABOUT CDE COURSES

CDE’s courses are developed in partnership with UAF departments, who exercise academic oversight and approval over course content and instructor. While many students take CDE courses as part of their programs—including offline and online degree programs through various UAF departments—there are currently no degrees attainable solely through CDE courses. CDE continues to work with departments to expand offerings, hopefully to include complete degree offerings, which are regularly requested by students.

COURSE MANAGEMENT

The Course Manager sets the schedule for all UAF credit courses offered through CDE. A full schedule of courses is offered every fall, spring and summer semester. The Course Manager works in collaboration with UAF academic departments to initiate and secure academic approval of, and maintain the course content. To insure continuous high quality of course design and content, the Course Manager schedules the periodic revision of all CDE courses with the department, content expert and CDE Instructional Design Team. The Course Manager also works with CDE’s Instructional Design Team and the CRCD Bookstore to insure all course content and materials are available for delivery to students. This position is responsible for the recruitment of and approval of all instructors as well as general oversight of operational activities. The Course Manager uses statistical and other analysis techniques to evaluate course development and longevity, enrollment management, instructor success, course completion and student academic success. The Course Manager is also the lead in CDE’s marketing efforts through print and electronic advertising, catalog and schedule listings, campus and other outreach activities and conferences.

The course design framework outlined later is just one way that CDE continues to improve its course offerings. The design process itself is situated within a larger context of quality checks and controls for development and revision that focuses on a collaborative relationship with the academic department that “owns” each course, including:

- Department approval before CDE begins development of a course
- Department approval of the developer (faculty who will be developing or revising the course)
- CDE course design review and approval by instructional designers utilizing the CDE Rubric and design checklist
- Department review and approval of the course content, verifying that it meets department academic standards and outcomes for the course designator, as defined by department curriculum group(s)
- Department approval of the instructor(s) for a course (usually the same faculty who developed it, but not always)

Each of these approvals is required or CDE does not complete the development/revision or offer the course. Instructor changes must also be approved by the department. Course development is self-funded through tuition revenues.
The Course Design Framework

The CDE Instructional Design Team has created a customized course development framework based on available and evolving research, including the Teaching for Understanding pedagogy and process developed at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the Understanding by Design development framework. The CDE Course Development Rubric and the derived Development Checklist are modeled partially after the nationally recognized Quality Matters project materials.

Important aspects of the development framework include:

- “Reverse Engineering” from outcomes to activities by way of evidence-based assessment of understanding, turning the process away from disconnected activities that are not coherently tied to learning objectives.
- Development emphasis on:
  - learning community within the classroom;
  - facilitating the three vectors of interaction between student, instructor and curriculum;
  - integrating place-based knowledge, information and activities;
  - creating activities that bring the “real world” and media into the classroom;
  - providing access to—and practices for working within—socially networked environments, inside the classroom and out.
- A foundation for online courses that promotes “Information Fluency”—the combination of:
  - discipline/course specific information and resources;
  - application of critical thinking skills and techniques;
  - presentation and participation tools and skills.
- Consideration of how activities and materials promote development of the students’ Personal Learning Environments (PLE).

Print-Based and “Correspondence” Courses

There are many purposes for providing distance education courses, but one of the most important involves providing educational opportunities for those unable to partake of traditional offerings. CDE, whose origins lie in paper-based (free of technological requirements) correspondence (turn-based, asynchronous assignment submission and grading) courses, recognizes that technological and material considerations still preclude a significant number of interested students from attending classes online or in a physical classroom. In Fall 2008, a survey of print-based students showed that 69% of students inside and 70% of students outside of Fairbanks were taking a print-based course because they couldn’t take part in that class in any other way. Print-based classes provide educational opportunities to students across the state (and country) including full-time employees, parents, seasonal workers, members of the military, and people who are incarcerated.

While the proportional presence of print-based correspondence courses has dropped from ~66% to ~33% of the student population in CDE operated courses, they remain a vital option that CDE continues to support while also constantly seeking to improve the student experience through providing enrichment materials, activities that incorporate prior knowledge, place-based and media friendly activities, multimedia, more effective models and grading rubrics, etc.
Synchronous and Asynchronous (Online) Courses

The continued trend at CDE, like distance education operations across the globe, is development of more online courses. A primary attraction to online courses through CDE has been the convenience and flexibility of self-paced learning… desirable characteristics that are sometimes in conflict with those necessary for student success. For this reason, online course developments and revisions increasingly incorporate significant time-based milestones and assignment/activity deadlines which both promote student success (completion) and provide signals that can be used to initiate extra contact with students to either get them on track to succeed in—or withdraw (or be dropped)—from that course. CDE recognizes that student success comes in a variety of forms: satisfactory completion of a course is the goal typically recognized by the institution, but successfully determining that a student isn’t prepared and withdrawing without penalty is vastly preferred to failing, or failing to complete, a course.

Though many courses, including most recent development and revisions, are no longer completely self-paced and the trend is toward weekly deadlines, CDE hasn’t yet incorporated required synchronous sessions in any of their courses. The reasons are partly philosophical, recognizing the importance of the flexibility in distance course offerings, and partly administrative, academic and political: CDE is currently working out the logistical and administrative details involved in adding this kind of requirement to courses as well as investigating the political effects of synchronous courses with regards to campus-based activities.

Currently, CDE has also proposed a joint research effort with partners in Canada, Norway and France to specifically investigate how to improve learning performance and outcomes in self-paced courses through transparency of progress and peripheral presence, facilitating peer-interactions, and providing for voluntary synchronous interaction without sacrificing the flexibility of being a self-paced offering.

Revision Process

A three-year calendar of course revision is used to make sure that courses that have continuous enrollment are evaluated and updated to integrate emerging best practices and aspects of innovation as technology changes. Often this cycle is preempted by book edition changes. With this opportunity courses may undergo complete revisions or only small changes might be made. At each step the Instructional Design Team makes suggestions and works with the developing faculty to make course improvements.
CDE INSTRUCTION

With its long and varied history—and being part of a complex institution with overlapping roles—it is inevitable that the perception of CDE instruction doesn’t always align with the reality of CDE operations.

CDE INSTRUCTORS (AND THE “PAPER GRADER” MYTH)

There are no “paper graders” at CDE. While 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, the courses themselves are delivered by CDE Instructors. The term “paper grader” is a colloquialism that was coined historically as a term to differentiate the group of CDE Instructors from the general population of UAF instructors for semantic reasons (such as communicating about specific CDE responsibilities and news that isn’t part of their Union workload and contract).

Regardless of the history of the term (CDE does have print-based courses so there are literally “paper” graders, which in part explains the persistence of the term), it is obsolete. CDE Instructors are no different from other instructors in terms of responsibilities to students and CDE does not support differentiated academic standards. In fact, CDE only employs departmentally approved instructors; approximately 85% of which are or were faculty at UAF or other higher education institutions.

The primary unique characteristic of being a CDE Instructor, beyond the obvious, is that CDE’s instructors are currently paid at a “piece” rate per lesson completed. A typical CDE Instructor contract contains wording outlining their responsibilities as an instructor, requiring:

“Evaluation of student lessons and examinations using sound educational practices and providing individual attention, encouragement and feedback.”

EXPECTATIONS OF CDE INSTRUCTORS

CDE Instructors are referred to as instructors internally and externally and expected to practice accordingly, including the following areas:

Communication and Office Hours

Instructors are required to provide timely responses to student inquiries via phone, email, fax and/or paper depending on the delivery modality of the course (e.g. print-based courses can’t be limited to email or other electronic communication). As part of the course design framework CDE requires clearly stated contact information and encourages “office hours” synchronously and asynchronously using Blackboard chat, IM, web-based chat, Elluminate and discussion forums.

Grading

Timeliness of grading is actively monitored through the CDE course information database, generation weekly reports regarding grading timeliness. Instructors who are consistently late are given an opportunity to improve. If they don’t, they are replaced or, if a suitable replacement isn’t found, the course is closed.
Availability

Instructors of semester-based courses are expected to be available for grading without significant gaps, as is the case with face-to-face instructors. In the case of year-long courses, faculty must notify us of times when they will be unavailable (the equivalent of leave time) so that this information is communicated to students. As is the case with any instructor on campus, instructors who are incapacitated or victims of an emergency situation demanding their absence are, if possible, replaced immediately; otherwise time is extended through incompletes or even course cancellation and refunds.

Feedback on Student Assignments

CDE emphasizes qualitative, formative feedback that will guide students during the learning process. Instructors are expected to provide custom feedback on student assignments as well as quantitative grades.

Instructor Support and Training

CDE recognizes that faculty members are experts within their subject area, but seldom have formal training in education. As part of the course development framework, Instructional Designers provide individual consultation and training on educational methodologies as well as applicable technologies. The CDE Design Team offers the most sophisticated, complete and current faculty development offerings in the UA system involving pedagogy, outcomes, assessment, implementation and practical use of technology and tools.

CDE instructors are encouraged to attend training and to apply for iTeach workshops. In 2007, a week-long iTeach session was offered specifically for CDE instructors.

STUDENT SERVICES

The Center for Distance Education is the focal point for independent distance learning at UAF. CDE provides services tailored to traditional and nontraditional students.

Traditional students are comprised of:

- Semester-based/UAF degree seeking students who register using UAOnline or their local registrar and purchase materials from the CRCD Book Store.
Semester-based/(UAA and UAS) degree seeking students who register using UAOnline or their local registrar and the CRCD Book Store mails books and materials
Semester-based/Non-degree seeking students from all three UA campuses as well as other institutions who transfer credits to their home institution later or take advantage of existing articulation agreements

Non-traditional students include:

- Students wanting to complete core courses before becoming officially degree seeking
- Students who cannot attend a campus course; i.e. single parent, full-time working people, continuing education
- Students wanting to take refresher courses
- Teachers seeking re-certification and step increases
- High school students—both home schooled and students from Fairbanks or surrounding areas—taking courses they can’t otherwise acquire (higher levels of math, for instance)
- Senior citizens
- Military personnel
- Prisoners housed at various State and Federal penal institutions
- Students in the U.S. and other countries that simply find the distance education model attractive

**Registrar and Scheduling**

CDE has a registrar who processes all yearlong course enrollments (online and offline). The CDE Registrar also manages grading activities in the Banner Student Information System: generating grade rosters, posting grades and processing drops and withdrawals.

The CDE Scheduler builds the CDE Year-Long and Semester-Based schedules and provides significant assistance in creating the CRCD Schedule. This includes data entry and retrieval from Banner, coordinating between the CDE Registrar, Course Manager, and Bookstore Manager, setting up registration and refund dates, and facilitating availability of web information. The CDE Scheduler also plays an important role in the CRCD audio conference offerings, handling Banner changes, setting up course audio conference numbers, and disseminating related information to staff and instructors across CRCD.

The CDE Registrar and Scheduler work together to provide numbers for statistical analysis, such as student success and course completion, which in part determines which courses receive attention for improvement, re-development or closure.

**Ongoing Course Support**

CDE provides multiple pathways for the ongoing support needs of instructors and students.

**Academic Advisor & Faculty Liaison**

For CDE Instructors, the Academic Advisor & Faculty Liaison:

- Serves as an advocate in processes of program and policy development
- Coordinates faculty development opportunities
- Facilitates a community of practice
- Mediates in the case of disputes with CDE staff or students
For CDE students (and potential students), the Academic Advisor & Faculty Liaison:

- Provides a single point of contact for advising needs
- Coordinates with the UAF Academic Advising Center to share information and ensure consistent advising practices

The Academic Advisor & Faculty Liaison is also responsible for creating, implementing and monitoring a program of formative and summative course assessment including in-course assessments, end-of-course surveys, and exit interviews and surveys.

CDE Staff

CDE staff is also a liaison between the instructors and students for all CDE courses. Primary course support revolves around lessons and assessments, including:

- Answering questions from instructors and students regarding CDE courses, their enrollment and registration, and operational class issues
- Sending letters to students reminding them how to get started and reminding them to check their progress at mid-semester
- Following up with students as requested by instructors
- Recording lesson transmittal to and from instructors
- Recording lesson grades
- Maintaining and securing exams for all CDE courses
- Proctoring exams for CDE students as well as those from other institutions
- Identifying and working with proctors at remote sites serving CDE students
- Monitoring and aiding in the enrollment process for all CDE blackboard courses
- Proactively communicating to instructors and students regarding withdrawal dates and other academic deadlines
- Following up on Temporary Incompletes and extensions
- Providing front-line Blackboard support for students and instructors
- Facilitating end-of-course survey distribution

As the primary day-to-day contact for instructors and students involved in 140 different courses, many of which are offered under multiple enrollment cycles, and using multiple technologies, CDE student services staff respond directly to a high volume of operational questions and inquiries.

FISCAL INCENTIVES AND DISINCENTIVES

CDE’s current grade-based model for instructor compensation has two primary motivations:

- To provide an opportunity distinct from other union activities in order to allow access to highly-qualified faculty
- To provide for provision of classes at lower levels of enrollment to provide diversity to distance students and to supplement campus offerings

However, this does not mean that CDE’s academic decision making processes are significantly driven by this fiscal model. In addition to implementing more time-based deadlines, one of the significant changes in CDE course development over the last five years involves lesson content and payment in two ways:
• Reducing the number of “paid” grading items that could be (and in some cases were) being graded automatically and through peer-review
• Increasing the number of paid authentic assessments and engagements, such as discussion board activities, class blogging, collaborative/group work

The CDE development framework, in emphasizing outcomes-based activities, authentic assessment, classroom community, and information fluency has a net result of increasing the number of compensated lessons in classes, which operates against the fiscal bottom line.

Similarly, while incompletes and high enrollments might be a fiscal incentive, CDE’s course design, delivery, and student services continue to work hard to prevent the former and avoid letting the latter stand in the way of discontinuing classes, abandoning development, and replacing instructors for quality reasons. While CDE administration and the design team always try to improve classes and find ways to support bringing a class and supporting an instructor up to their standards, they have an established track record of making decisions based on outcomes and effectiveness rather than simple contribution to a ledger.

It’s useful to note that the CDE emphasis on quality—and the subsequent rejection or demand to invest further development time in a course—has sometimes come as a surprise to departments who have found themselves approving a course that CDE deems unacceptable!

A HISTORY OF INNOVATION

CDE hasn’t been content to automatically embrace practices and standards decided by others, but has sought to investigate in little-known—but vital—areas and pursue innovation locally.

DISTANCE TEACHING, LEARNING AND ENGAGEMENT

CDE Design Team members, administration, and staff have made significant contributions to the national conversation about distance education and educational technology, while collaborating with institutions across the globe to develop new best practices involving emerging pedagogy and technologies. Projects that have contributed original knowledge, been adopted in whole or in part by other MAUs and institutions, and brought innovation to CRCD include:

• The iTeach model of intensive, practical hands-on engagement with technology and cutting-edge pedagogy, demand for which has quickly outpaced CDE’s capacity as a provider and which has been adopted, in whole or in part, at UAA and UAS
• iTeach and iTeach express activities providing faculty and staff development to Chukchi, Kuskokwim, Bristol Bay and Northwest Campuses
• Investigating and implementing synchronous, web-conferencing tools for CRCD and other partners; selecting and operating the best-of-breed (Elluminate Live) and negotiating the contract and managing the transition that made Elluminate available to all of UA
• Continuous efforts to provide quality courses for semester-based enrollment in the CRCD catalog of courses for rural students
• Operation of the AkICE course exchange initiative and management software
• UAF Blackboard was largely pioneered by CDE, which continues to be its largest single group user
- The Nenana Native Songs project which combined cutting-edge multi- and social-media with traditional Native Alaskan ceremonies and songs
- The UAF Engage project, implementing social network technology to create a centralized, participatory hub promoting engagement with multiple UAF entities inside CRCD and out
- Development of an end-to-end course development framework for CDE courses as well as distance (and face-to-face) courses across CRCD, UAF, and other MAUs
- Development of the Information Fluency concept that builds on a variety of previous initiatives involving digital literacy and digital citizenship to provide a coherent framework for teaching and learning in the 21st century
- Significant original contributions to the development of the Personal Learning Environment (PLE) for students, supporting learning across and through the curriculum and lifelong learning activities
- Founding an Open Education presence for UAF, providing materials for students to prepare for—and supplement—their engagement with classes as well as support faculty in developing and delivering classes

A Context of Tradition and Community

While engaged in new and innovative activities, CDE hasn’t neglected existing, traditional areas or its local community. In addition to supporting and improving print-based CDE courses, CDE took the initiative in outsourcing UAF audio conference services—providing enhanced features at a greatly reduced cost for this technology critical to CRCD campuses and students. CDE created teaching tips and training material for effective audio conference delivery, creating more usable audio conference materials, videoconference delivery and techniques, syllabi that work, authentic assessment, portfolio development and many other traditional and/or ubiquitous needs at CRCD and UAF. CDE has engaged in numerous training and development activities that—in whole or in part—focused on rural educators and students, including colloquia with internationally recognized educators.

Collaborating across the University

For the past five years, CDE has played a leading role in collaboration across the University of Alaska system, supporting and operating several major initiatives.

iTeach

iTeach is the flagship of faculty development at the University of Alaska providing intensive, personalized, practical faculty development in teaching and learning technology and pedagogy. More than 175 faculty members from every region of the state have participated in iTeach seminars.

iDesign

The iDesign conference hosted periodically by CDE pulls together instructional designers from within the University of Alaska as well as other educational and vocational institutions around the state who provide similar types of faculty support for distance education courses. Through face to face workshops, Elluminate Live! web conferencing and audio conference meetings, and provision of internet resources, this group has the opportunity to learn from one another and to explore topics that affect the philosophy, process, and production of curriculum for higher education.
Distance Education Gateway

The statewide Distance Education Gateway continues to be developed, maintained and operated by CDE staff in conjunction with UA Statewide. The Gateway provides the only centralized point for students and prospective students to learn about distance learning options across the entire University system and will play a major role in the future.

**Technology Innovation and Support**

The dedicated CDE System Administrator—in coordination with the Office of Information Technology and outside service providers where necessary—provides direct, primary implementation and support of systems used for CDE staff operations, communications, course development and delivery, and student information services. The Systems Administrator provides technological support for some CRCD Bookstore operations as well.

The System Administrator—assisted by the rest of CDE—has consistently maintained an innovative technological context for CDE operations, such as:

- Planning and employing a Voice Over IP (VoIP) system that makes available extensive new and improved telephone capabilities and performance beyond any service provided by UAF Telephone Services or outside vendors while saving thousands of dollars per month in operating costs
- Implementing and maintaining multiple development platforms for course and Recharge design and development activities
- Employing a live, online chat for students and potential students through the CDE website
- Maintaining a multi-platform file sharing system for all CDE operational areas
- System maintenance and support for educational platform development including Wordpress Multi-User, Drupal CMS, DocuWiki, PmWiki, Movable Type and many other services
- Creating and maintaining operation of a sophisticated conference room system with audio conference, video conference, VoIP, multiple computer displays, CD/DVD/digital audio, and a SmartBoard
- Direct desktop support for the wide array of user needs and abilities within CDE’s diverse organization, including supporting two remote employees
- Investigating emerging mobile learning environments, such as cell phone, 3G devices, netbooks, and other handheld devices

CDE’s enrollment has increased by an average of 8 to 10% each of the last 3 years.
LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

CDE continues to seek improvement in their offerings and take advantage of emerging pedagogies and technologies to meet student and institutional needs. The administration, staff and instructors at CDE look forward to new opportunities including investigating new models of course delivery and instructor compensation, working on creating open resources for students and faculty, extending the functionality and services of the Distance Gateway, and cooperative service agreements with departments with an eye toward helping departments reach their goals while offering more options for distance education students including complete degree programs.
QUICK FACTS

• CDE is a part of the College of Rural and Community Development (CRCD)
• Enrollment in courses delivered through CDE is approximately 7300 annually, generating more than 22,000 student credit hours (SCH)
• CDE’s enrollment has increased by an average of 8 to 10% each of the last 3 years
• CDE serves over 4300 individual students annually, 70% of them UAF main campus students or students residing in the Fairbanks area, 21% outside Fairbanks, and 9% outside Alaska
• CDE’s student age distribution: 53% are 19-25, 19% are 26-30, and 28% are 30+ years old
• CDE offers around 140 courses, which includes some print based courses
• CDE student services staff processed nearly 65,000 individual student lessons last year
• CDE facilitated courses are offered cooperatively through 38 UAF academic departments
• Currently there are approximately 80 instructors teaching for CDE, approximately 85% of whom teach—or have taught—at UAF or other higher education institutions