Online Program Best Practices

This document provides an overview of best practices in course design, grounded in research and evidence-based practice, for online programs. These best practices form the foundation of a course and promote continuity in the student experience. UWEX instructional designers and faculty partners work together to incorporate these practices into the course development process.

Course Elements	Best Practices
Primary Focus	
Competencies are the foundation of course design. They define the specific skills, behaviors, and knowledge that students must master. *Also commonly referred to as learning outcomes, objectives, or goals.*	- Must be measurable. - Are directly linked to assessments. - When possible, connect to real-world applications.
Authentic assessments ask students to perform tasks that are analogous to those found in actual professional or real-world settings.	- Enable competency evaluation. - Introduce a high degree of authenticity mirroring real-world applications. - Include practice and feedback opportunities (formative assessments) that can lead to summative assessments.
Learning resources consist of readings, multimedia, and other resources that are the primary methods used to help students successfully prepare for assessments.	- Align with competencies and assessments. - Vary in format (e.g., text vs. video). - Are listed with short descriptions connecting them to learning goals.
Alignment ensures that all resources, assessments, and competencies have an established relationship with each other.	Is expressed through an alignment grid or course map.
Rubrics are used to clearly communicate expectations, provide feedback to students, and aid in specifying the level of performance a student has achieved.	- Are paired with authentic assessments and other performance-based activities. - Clearly state the criteria used to evaluate student performance. - Provide feedback reinforced by written, student-specific commentary.

Syllabi provide course overviews and expectations consistently across an entire program.	- Apply a standard design across all courses in a program. - Include the following sections: - Course Description - Course Competencies - Required Textbooks and/or Learning Resources - Required Technology - Faculty Information - Calendar - Grading Expectations - Academic Standards - Accessibility Guidelines
Faculty-student engagement is the communication between faculty and students through effective feedback, clear expectations, and connections to the real world.	- Documents communication and grading turnaround expectations (from within syllabus). - Provides customized, written feedback for assessments and other learning activities. - Incorporates timely information on current events as these relate to course material.
Legal compliance in online course development entails creating content is accessible to all students and follows the laws governing copyright and fair use	- ADA compliance examples include, but are not limited to: - Transcripts provided for all recorded content - Text documents are searchable - Tables have headers - Images have Alt-text descriptions - Copyright controls how a work can or cannot be distributed. - Fair use is an exception to copyright that allows unlicensed use of materials in certain circumstances. There are four factors that determine fair use: - The purpose and character of the use - The nature of the work - The amount and substantiality of the portion used - The effect on the market
Course content is selected and developed in a way that maximizes student engagement, representation, voice, and agency.	Students are provided with choices for how they demonstrate their understanding of the content.

	- Diverse perspectives are incorporated when selecting the learning resources. - Course content creates space for students to share their lived experiences. - The concepts of equity, diversity, and inclusion are intentionally incorporated into the development and/or curation of course content.
Secondary Focus	
Student-course engagement is the way in which students interact with course components such as assessments, readings, and multimedia.	- Includes active learning opportunities (e.g., case studies, problem solving, and current-event assignments). - Limits the use of passive activities such as viewing PowerPoints, taking quizzes, and watching lengthy videos.
Student-student engagement is communication and collaboration among students.	Provides a variety of meaningful opportunities for regular student interaction with peers (e.g., group projects, discussions, and debates).
Media and technology elements are used to enhance and support the online learning experience.	Are selected **after** instructional goal(s) have been determined, to facilitate those goal(s).
Tertiary Focus	
Objective assessments usually consist of specific, discrete questions and answers in the form of multiple-choice or true/false questions.	- Are used primarily for practice and student self-evaluation. - Are generally not appropriate for competency evaluation.