

EVALUATING AND ASSESSING QUALITY IN THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

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The complex process of providing university level instruction on a variety of platforms, with a variety of degree choices, inspires as well as inhibits quality. Achieving excellence in the online environment requires dedicated instructors, staff, systems, and a university wide commitment to evaluation and assessment.

The concept of Evaluation refers to the larger concept of course and program review, quality of content, and aspects related to institutional planning and organization, following the Princeton University's world net web definition (2009). Assessment refers to the examination of the instructor, his/her teaching methods, pedagogy/andragogy, faculty-to-student, and student-to-student interactions.

This university administers end of course student evaluations, instructor observations, and course monitoring which may relate to student interactions or course issues such as communication, assignments, and content. Critical to evaluation and assessment is feedback to instructors and university administrators.

Quality and excellence is not based on "what if" or "let's try this," but on data developed over time with consistency and reliability.

The current philosophy and engagement of institutions of higher education and private companies tend to address the needs of the U.S. traditional and non-traditional student populations, as well as international programs and students (Altbach, Knight, 2006). With world-wide locations, on-ground as well as online environments, the organization for regional accreditation takes the term "one university" very seriously. This university strives to excel as one university with a master syllabus for each course used online and on ground, the same textbook(s) for each course no matter where the location, and faculty trained to examine and reflect on their teaching experiences.

End of course student evaluations

Student evaluation of faculty is purposefully reviewed at the university, especially in relationship to students receiving clear and concise feedback from their instructors. Within the online environment, every course taught through the Center for Online

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Learning (COL) is evaluated by each student each term as the student evaluation instrument pops up on the first day of the last week of class, forcing students to provide feedback before going back into their courseroom(s). The evaluation instrument includes questions that are related to the content of the courses, their instructors, and the technology used. This information is reported to the various departments within the university for course, instructor, and technology improvement and action planning.

Annual student and faculty satisfaction surveys

College and university leaders must understand how satisfied online learners are with their educational experience - both “inside” and “outside” of the classroom setting - in order to best serve those students. By collecting satisfaction data from online learners on a regular basis, campuses are able to determine where they are best serving these students and where there are areas for improvement. Satisfied students are more likely to be successful students. Research indicates that institutions with more satisfied students have higher graduation rates, lower loan default rates, and higher alumni giving. Satisfaction with an institution includes a combination of academic factors as well as areas related to campus services. An institution needs to identify all of the issues that are relevant to students. These include their interaction with faculty, as well as the service they receive from staff and administrators; the resources provided to students; policies that are in place; and students’ overall feelings about the value of the experience (Noel-Levitz, 2008, p. 2). To this end, the Center for Online Learning also administers annual Student and Faculty Satisfaction Surveys. Students are asked questions concerning their satisfaction with their orientation to the COL courses and degree programs, enrollment process, academic advising, financial aid services, classroom and university technology, instruction, administrative services, online library support services, university environment, and whether they would recommend Saint Leo University to others. Faculty are asked if they are satisfied with the academic rigor, students, University leadership, training, faculty support services, online library services, course navigation, course content, and course design. The results of both of these annual surveys are used to pinpoint areas that need improvement and address identified concerns.

Instructor observations and course monitoring

Each new instructor, adjunct or full-time faculty is observed during his/her first year of teaching for the University. Department chairs and the school dean are responsible for completing class observations. All instructors are observed in four year cycles. Each school year over 250 adjuncts and full-time faculty are observed in a variety of platforms. The administration identifies instructors to be observed based on the time of the last observation, requests by department chair or school dean, and/or student course evaluations from the previous year, semester, or term.

The observation and feedback process for online classes begins when an evaluator trained to review online courses is asked to evaluate a class and provide feedback. To complete observations and provide feedback, the designated evaluator follows a procedure designed and developed by a faculty committee. The department chairs make arrangements with the online program administrators to provide the evaluator access to the course(s) that the evaluator has been assigned to observe. Evaluators receive information from their chairs about how to access the course(s). Communication is critical to the observation process. Before a class visit, online or on ground, the observer informs the instructor that s/he will be entering the classroom and asks for a copy of the course syllabus and any material or handouts that will be covered during the visit. The observer will send a copy of the assessment form to the instructor so the instructor will know the criteria the observer is expecting during the observation. On ground classroom visitations are usually 50 minutes or longer. Online observations may take place over several weeks. The evaluator then accesses the online course(s) and observes the student work and the faculty postings and responses. Reviewers are asked to observe more than one week or module. The Online Class Observation and Feedback Forms have been designed to provide a structure for organizing observations of the online instruction, a place to document observations, and a means to provide both affirming and constructive feedback. The forms are also used to record observations and to provide feedback and summary comments. There is room to make specific comments after each section. At the end of the form, reviewers indicate their evaluation of the instruction. This overall rating must be justified by documented observations and feedback. Within five days after

completion of the evaluation, observations and feedback are sent to the instructor. The observer meets, emails, or talks with the instructor to review feedback and to offer an opportunity to discuss the observation. Comments by the instructor are documented and recorded on the form. Both the observer and the instructor sign the form. The instructor is provided a copy of the completed forms (which includes his or her comments). A copy of the completed form is sent to the appropriate Chair, Dean, and administration.

This process has been highly successful in improving teaching and communication with the large number of part-time faculty at the University. At the end of the evaluation form is a survey link. Over eighty percent of instructors completing the survey have indicated that the process and observation have helped them to become better teachers.

Faculty who are assigned to peer assessment are trained for observing and assessing specific factors within courses offered online. The instrument that was designed for this purpose is based on factors that are aligned with Chickering and Gamson's Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education (1987; Chickering, Ehrmann, 1996). Of particular importance in the online environment is instructional immediacy (Hutchins, 2003). Therefore, faculty behaviors, such as response time on student questions, is reviewed as part of this peer-to-peer assessment. Peer-to-peer faculty assessment takes place across all venues. Each new full time faculty member is assigned a mentor. The mentor observes the new faculty member on several occasions and gives feedback in a non-threatening way. There is no formal assessment process or forms for these mentor observations. It is part of the University's support and expectation of teaching quality. New online faculty members are provided training as part of the hiring process. If these applicants do not answer questions which are embedded within the training with clarity and conciseness, they are not offered a teaching position. Those applicants who are hired are provided mentors and are closely observed by an instructional analyst during their first teaching terms. Online faculty meet regularly with their department chairs using Elluminate, a computer conferencing system which has audio/video and application sharing capabilities. During these meetings, online adjunct faculty members have an opportunity to discuss courses, programs, and assessment leading to better teaching and learning outcomes. This initiative also

provides a reinforcement of the “one university” philosophy that is inherent within the University’s diverse course delivery capabilities. Webinars also provide online faculty with assorted topics such as “The Joy of Teaching,” “Incorporating Social Justice Topics into Course Discussions,” and “FERPA/HIPPA and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Regulations”.

Course evaluation and faculty assessment are inherent in the values of the University. A foundation of respect as well as a commitment to excellence provides the basis for university improvement and distinction.

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