

Distance Learning Mock Review – What have we learned?

In Spring 2014, the Distance Learning Committee conducted a Mock Review on distance learning courses in preparation for the next accreditation visit. Mt. SAC DL Faculty were invited to volunteer their online and/or -hybrid courses for review by peer reviewers. These peer reviewers were Mt. SAC's own DL Coordinator and Assistant Coordinator and volunteers from other community colleges, who have extensive experience in distance learning and some had recently been through an ACCJC accreditation visit. A total of 17 online and hybrid classes were reviewed, including those volunteered by Mt. SAC's DL Coordinator and Assistant Coordinator.

The peer reviewers provided a full picture of our classes' strengths and areas for improvement, and they looked beyond just accreditation to also include a few best practices.

For a full-review of the mock review process, please contact Mary Johnson.

AREAS OF STRENGTH

- The reviewers found that most of the courses reviewed probably met regular and effective contact, but email messages are not visible to reviewers, and so other means must be used as well.
- Student-to-student forums are an important way for students to communicate with each other in the class. This should not be the only type of forum in the class, however.
- Most of our classes have great content for online courses: one reviewer noted, "Rich, thought-provoking material".
- Consistency in the presentation of each module or week is good. The materials are well organized and easy to find.
- Welcoming attitude of professors.
- Content-relative discussions.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- Our DL classes need to more obviously show professors' regular and effective contact with students.
- Include a specific drop policy for last date of attendance and include procedure if student is not "academically active" in the class. Include language on when you consider a student as having "quit" attending (participating).
- Any publisher materials, such as PowerPoint presentations and PDFs need to be ADA compliant.
- Make it clear in your course whether the course is hybrid or fully online.
- Make the topics consistent for students.
- Open documents in a new window.
- Discussions that do not require student interaction with the professor do NOT fulfill the regular and effective contact requirement.
- For hybrid courses, professors must be able to show online activities for the "online" portion of the class. Discussion forums are still required.
- Student Learning Outcomes should be in the syllabus.

FINDINGS

Regular and Effective Contact

- **Professors must make their interaction with students more obvious to reviewers.** There should be multiple methods of communicating with students. Announcements are very important to show that the instructor is initiating contact with the student. However, it is also essential that faculty have required discussion forums and that the faculty participate in these forums with postings to students.
- **Regular and effective contact needs to be more evident.** Reviewers found that professors did not participate in discussion forums.
- Descriptive subject lines are important as well as details within announcements, so students get a feel for both the topic of the message as well as the content and importance of the message.
- **Recycled announcements without any specific information for the specific class** may indicate that a course is self-paced and deemed as a “**correspondence**” course.

Accessibility/Americans of Disabilities Act (ADA 508) Compliance

- **Publisher materials** need to be **ADA compliant** including PowerPoint images and PDFs.
- **Documents should include the use of styles**, especially important for visual impairments to see the topics and the organization of the document.

Last Date of Attendance

- **Grading and drop-policy must be clearly displayed, including last date of attendance.**
- The **last date of attendance** should be defined clearly as well as when a student will be dropped for no longer participating academically.

Student Engagement/Multiple Learning Styles (Best Practices)

- A professor’s supportive attitude can be conveyed in greetings and announcements. Greetings and announcements can engage students in the course. Greetings can also convey a professor’s desire to help students be successful in the class. The atmosphere of the message also conveys to students a feeling about the class – whether it is inviting or not.
- The **landing page of the course is a critical point of entry.** Students should know immediately what class they have entered. A visual or banner is helpful and should include the course name, CRN, class times, etc.-Professor contact information is also critical and should be visible to students. For review purposes, the indication of full online or hybrid- will help the reviewer better understand the course.
- Professors should explore **various modes of delivery** beyond text-based delivery to offer students **multiple ways of learning.**
- **Dates should be accurately displayed.** Reviewers may be viewing the complete course and not just active sections of the course.
- Content should be checked to be sure that content is accurate and that links are active and ADA compliant.
- Organization of the website is crucial including **consistency within weeks or topics.**

QUESTIONS

- We were questioned on our “no-show” online practices with regard to Title IV financial aid eligibility.
- Would there be a Title 5 regulation problem if we were to open a class prior to the first day of the term?

NEXT STEPS

- Reviewer results specific to each class reviewed will be shared with each individual faculty member who volunteered his/her course for review so that the referenced comments can be addressed if applicable.
- The lessons learned without identifying information about the classes or the faculty will be communicated to all distance learning faculty and administrators and will be addressed in the form of enhanced training offerings.
- Specific questions posed by reviewers will be addressed by DLC.