

Hartnell College



Distance Education: Online Learning Best Practices



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**Dr. Edward J. Valeau
President/Superintendent**

**Dr. Victor Krimsley
Vice President for Instruction**

**Gary Hughes
Associate Vice President, Educational Technology and
Library Services**

The Hartnell College Academic Senate

The Hartnell College Faculty Association

The Distance Education Sub-Committee Members

Dr. Ignacio Pando, Chair
Gerry Beatty
Jennifer Calmus
Sabrina Coffelt
Wanda Guibert
Gary Hughes
Vic Krimsley
Garrett Kenehan
Jennifer Lagier
Patty McEfee
Kathy Mendelsohn
Cheryl O'Donnell
Jorge Sanchez
Joe Welch
Jennifer Smith
Ann Wright

VISION/MISSION/GOALS

Introduction

In Spring of 2003, the President/Superintendent of the college established the Distance Education Subcommittee of the Technology Master Planning Committee. The membership of this subcommittee consisted of faculty representatives from the instructional divisions of the college, classified staff, and administration.

The Distance Education Subcommittee was tasked with preparing written recommendations for guidelines, policies, and procedures for the college's Distance Education Program. On March 28, 2003, the Distance Education Subcommittee held its first meeting and agreed upon the following organizational issues:

1. The distance education best practices document would include the following topics:
 - Distance Education Philosophy and Vision
 - Recommended Institutional Responsibilities
 - Recommended Faculty Responsibilities
 - Recommended Student Support Services for Distance Learners
 - Recommended Assessments/Evaluations

2. The purpose of the document would be to recommend "best practices" regarding distance education policies and procedures to the college community. Through its shared governance procedures, the College would/could implement the recommendations after consultation and agreement with appropriate governing bodies, i.e., academic senate, administration, etc.

Furthermore, the intent of this document is to be in compliance with the *California Community College Distance Education Regulations and Guidelines* in addition to the Hartnell College Faculty Association contract with the District.

Distance education is not new to Hartnell College. Hartnell has used video technology to offer courses on-campus and at distant sites. For several years, Hartnell faculty have been developing and teaching online courses. These early adopters were responsible for finding and implementing appropriate technology tools to create and manage their online courses. As a result of the success of these early online courses, student demand for online education has increased. The college expects a continued steady increase in the number of online course offerings and of students enrolled in these courses. Because of this growth, the college has established the Distance Education Subcommittee, which is tasked with strategic thinking and coordinated action to facilitate the growth of our

distance education program. The following document is a result of this process and focuses on online learning.

The Vision/Mission of Distance Education at Hartnell College

The Distance Education Program supports the technological and educational mission, goals and objectives of Hartnell College, an educational institution serving the eastern half of Monterey County from a main campus in Salinas and several off-campus sites in East Salinas, King City, and Natividad Medical Center. Thus, the vision and mission of distance education are as follows:

The Vision of the Hartnell College Distance Education Program is to provide the highest quality instruction and support services that are accessible and responsive to the learning needs of its communities. Hartnell College is dedicated to a diverse educational and cultural environment that prepares students for productive participation in the 21st century.

The Mission of the Distance Education Program at Hartnell College is to provide equal access to courses, certificates, and degree programs through quality distance education.

Purpose

The purpose of distance education at Hartnell College is to provide a student-centered, technology-based system for the delivery of post-secondary education that meets the needs of citizens and employers alike.

Definition

Distance education at Hartnell College refers to any catalog-approved course in which the education occurs without the instructor and student being physically in the same location. In addition, Title 5 regulations Section 55205 define distance education as:

Distance Education means instruction in which the instructor and student are separated by distance and interact through the assistance of communication technology. All distance education is subject to the general requirements of Article 3. Distance Education. In addition, instruction provided as distance education is subject to the requirements that may be imposed by the Americans with Disabilities Act (42 U.S.C. Sec. 12100 et seq.) and section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, (29 U.S.C. 794d).

Goals

The goals of distance education at Hartnell College are as follows:

1. Create courses that are of equal academic rigor and standards as courses delivered on-site.
2. Develop a technology support mechanism to provide coordinated help services to all involved in distance education.
3. Encourage innovation while maintaining high academic standards and consistency.
4. Develop distance education indicators for assessment, evaluation, and funding.
5. Provide student support services for distance education students.

Distance education is not a replacement for the on-site classroom environment; it is an alternative method of delivering instruction intended to meet the needs and learning styles of a segment of our student population. Distance education provides an opportunity for students to enroll in Hartnell courses who may otherwise be unable to do so because of scheduling conflicts, transportation limitations, childcare constraints, etc. Simply, distance education provides another option to our students.

RECOMMENDED INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES

To successfully implement an effective distance education program at Hartnell College, there must be a continued commitment to the infrastructure needs, including staffing, hardware upgrades, software upgrades, training, and support for faculty and students. The administration has demonstrated an initial commitment to distance education by funding an online course management system.

Distance education requires ongoing support for faculty and students as well as technical support. Issues of load, class size, technical and teaching assistance, teaching schedules, academic calendar and compensation are negotiable items, which will need to be addressed in the agreement between the Hartnell College District and the Hartnell College Faculty Association/CTA. However, the following recommendations will ensure academic integrity and student success in an online environment:

Load

According to Palloff and Pratt, preparing, teaching, and evaluating for an online class requires approximately three times the number of hours per week compared to a traditional, on-site class (*Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace*, 49). In consideration of this heavier workload, faculty can be presented with various incentives. For example, at Wytheville Community College (Virginia), faculty may be compensated for the development of a Distance Education course in the form of release time. The amount of release time assigned varies depending on the nature of the course and the faculty effort required for course development. Typically, release time could be awarded in the following manner:

- Three hours (1 semester) for courses which require substantial faculty preparation of learning materials (video tapes, audio tapes, computer programs, televised lectures, **new** paper based independent courses, or other similar learning materials)
- Two hours (1 semester) for courses which require substantial adaptation of externally prepared materials (commercial audio or video tapes, computer programs, etc)

Recommended Class Size

Palloff and Pratt suggest that

Groups that are too large can be overwhelming for the instructor and the participants; five to ten is an ideal number. Asynchronous groups, however, can be much larger. As many as twenty or more

participants can have a successful experience in an asynchronous setting (*Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace*, 55).

Therefore, the first time a class is placed online, a class size of no less than 15 and no more than 30 students is recommended. In subsequent semesters, it is recommended a class be limited to a maximum of 30 students, to allow for expected attrition resulting in an ideal class size of 20-25 students.

In doing so, a more manageable workload will be created for the instructor, the community-building process will be supported, information overload will be minimized, and the perceived quality of the course will be raised as students feel recognized and heard (Palloff & Pratt, *The Virtual Student*, 119).

Student Readiness

Distance learners should have completed one or all of the following before enrolling in an online class:

- An online readiness and a technical readiness assessment with a minimum grade of 70 percent
- An introduction to online learning (on-site, hybrid, or online) class with a grade of “C” or better

Instructor Readiness

Because delivering an online class may require skills outside of a faculty's subject matter, faculty wishing to deliver courses online should have satisfied one or more of the following:

- Completed formal coursework in the teaching and delivery of distance education
- Taken courses online
- Successfully delivered courses in the online environment

In addition, it is recommended that faculty who have not used the current course management system at Hartnell College successfully complete an orientation to the current course management software as well as demonstrate the ability to upload and/or create documents compatible with the course management software that also adhere to ADA compliance.

Instructor Support

Hartnell College will provide resources to allow distance educators to develop proficiency in creating and developing distance education courses, such as

- Staff development workshops
- Instructional technologists
- Faculty Resource Center (hardware and software)
- Help desk

Curriculum Approval Process

Any class offered at Hartnell College should strive to provide the best possible learning opportunities for students, regardless of the delivery mode. Distance education is a mode of delivery; the content and objectives of any distance education course should be equal to the content and objectives of that same course delivered traditionally. In addition, the Curriculum Committee requires separate approval for any distance education course, even if its on-site counterpart already exists.

Course Management Software Standard

- Course Management software products must be in compliance with ADA regulations and will be reviewed as necessary by the Technology Master Planning Team and may be changed after consultation and agreement with appropriate governing bodies, i.e., Academic Senate.
- Hartnell College will adopt and support course management software to ensure consistency among distance education courses.
- Other software platforms which adhere to the ADA compliance law may be used independently if provided by and adequately supported by a recognized publisher or other organization at no cost to the college.
- Hartnell College will provide faculty training and support for the course management software used at the institution.

Instructor Incentives

The Administration may offer instructor incentives for developing and/or teaching online or hybrid* courses, such as:

- Substitution of online student contact for on-campus office hours
- Release time and/or development stipend during the first semester the course is provided online

- Computer hardware/software for use by instructor
- Other items

"Faculty do respond positively and express interest in becoming involved in online work when appropriate incentives are put in place. . ." (Palloff & Pratt, *Lessons from the Cyberspace Classroom*, 40).

* Note: For purpose of these guidelines and procedures, a hybrid course is one that meets on-site during a pre-determined period in lecture mode and the remainder of the student work is conducted online.

Intellectual Property Rights

Faculty who have created intellectual property such as course materials in all formats shall retain ownership of that property except when the college provides substantial or unusual funds, facilities, or opportunities to support the creative effort. In the latter case, Faculty and Hartnell College shall negotiate an agreement that determines appropriate ownership rights and faculty compensation.

Facilities and Finances

It is recommended that Hartnell College possess the equipment and technical expertise required for distance education. The Institution's long-range planning, budgeting, and policy processes should reflect the facility, staffing, and equipment (maintenance and upgrades) needs as well as other resources essential to the viability and effectiveness of the distance education program.

RECOMMENDED FACULTY RESPONSIBILITIES

General

A quality distance education program is driven by solid course content and objectives, trained faculty, and institutional support for all involved constituents (students, staff, and faculty).

While faculty responsibilities are governed by academic and negotiated policies and procedures, faculty can attempt to ensure that all distance education classes they facilitate contribute to a quality learning experience for students by following the best practices suggested in this section and by consulting the *Distance Education: Online Learning Faculty Handbook*.

Training to Obtain Skill Set to Conduct an Effective Online Class

Because delivering an online class may require skills outside of a faculty's subject matter, faculty wishing to deliver courses online should have satisfied one or more of the following:

- Completed formal coursework in the teaching and delivery of distance education
- Taken courses online
- Successfully delivered courses in the online environment

Learning Environment

- The content and objectives of the online course should be equal to the content and objectives of the same course taught in the on-site environment; it is the method of delivery and evaluation that will differ.
- The course outline must identify how the instructor will ensure that equivalent instruction will take place in both environments.

Availability and Response Time to Students

- Because of the inherent nature of isolation that the online environment produces, online instructors need to inform students of their response time, which should not exceed 48 hours.
- Faculty should consider a synchronous office hour during which they can be reached.

Creating ADA Compliant Courses and Materials

- ALL online courses and materials should be required to be ADA compliant.

Copyright Laws

- Copyright laws need to be understood and adhered to by online instructors.

Course Management

- Course materials may be developed by the instructor or provided by the publisher.
- Courses should have a consistent appearance without infringing upon the instructor's academic freedom.
- Online courses should use the course management software to provide a familiar "gateway" to students along with standards developed for all Hartnell online courses.
- Technical support information needs to be identified for students.
- Course management details (dates, rosters, log-on information, materials, etc.) need to be coordinated with the distance education contact person (Instructional Technologist).

Model Course Syllabus Content

Because on-site student-teacher contact does not occur in distance education on a regular basis, it is imperative to provide detailed documents to students. Examples (described in more detail in the *Distance Education Faculty Handbook*) include:

- Syllabus (including content, objectives, methods of evaluation)
- Deadline dates
- Grading scales with rubrics explaining expectations
- Types of assessments
- Guidelines, expectations, and schedules for class participation (quality and quantity) in chat rooms and discussion boards

- Instructor contact information (preferred e-mail address, telephone number, and/or IM address, office hours, etc.)
- Netiquette, ethics, and consequences of plagiarism
- Location of materials
- Faculty information (biography, office location, etc.)

Plan for Technology Problems

- Specify a back-up plan for technology failures; specify who to contact as well as method (phone, e-mail address of contact)
- Advise students to expect technology challenges (one sentence in syllabus may be enough!)
- Make students aware that you will not answer technical support type questions, but you will provide the contact information for technical support.

Define Expectations for Faculty/Student Response

- Define the standards for timeliness for responding to messages by providing general guidelines for the amount of time it "usually" will take to respond to student messages or specific days/times that the faculty member will respond to e-mail messages.
- Specify the preferred e-mail address and/or virtual office hours. If office hours are done online, provide technical information to support participation (IM address, IRC address, etc.)
- Recognize and use the differing forms of feedback (information and acknowledgement).
- Open a "café" in the Discussion Board where students can post questions and get feedback from either you or their colleagues.
- If students are hesitant about submitting assignments, papers, exam, etc., electronically, explain the "Confirm Response" function that is part of many e-mail applications.
- Set specific deadlines to help keep students on task and avoid procrastination. (Keeping students on track will help them set their schedules and avoid faculty having massive amounts of work to grade at the end of the course.)
- Provide a list of assignments with due dates to assist the faculty and the students to keep on track.

RECOMMENDED STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES FOR DISTANCE LEARNERS

A goal of Hartnell College is to provide equivalent services for on-site and distance education students. As a way to achieve the desired goals listed below, a committee composed of representatives from Student Services, as well as students, faculty and staff, should be established to help review and implement distance education support services as resources become available.

1. Online student services should include the following areas:
 - Admissions and Records
 - Assessment
 - Bookstore
 - Campus Security
 - Campus Tours
 - Career Center
 - Child Development Center
 - Cooperative Work Experience & Internships
 - Counseling and Guidance
 - Disabled Student Services
 - EOPS Program
 - Financial Aid and Scholarships
 - General Information Center
 - International Student Services
 - Job Bank
 - Library
 - Matriculation
 - Orientation
 - Registration
 - Re-Entry Center
 - Sports Center
 - Student Government
 - Student Activities
 - Technology Help Desk
 - Transfer Center
 - Tutorial Center
 - Veterans' Services
2. Distance learners should have access to the same informational resources provided to on-site students. Having this information posted online would also benefit on-site students.
3. Distance learners should have easy access to all forms necessary for conducting basic college business at a distance. Online application and

- registration forms should be provided and linked with the College information system. All students should be able to apply and register online, paying all necessary fees by credit card.
4. All students should be provided with the necessary information to facilitate remote access to research resources. This includes access to digital library resources, full text databases and reference services.
 5. Expand online counseling/advising services so that distance learners have the same access to services as on-site students. This should include academic advising and career counseling services.
 6. Provide training and support to student services staff so that students can easily make contact with student services providers who will have knowledge of the unique needs and circumstances of distance learners and make additional modes of communication available to students and to counselors. By its very nature, distance education occurs via methods other than on-site interaction. That does not mean that online education does not rely on interaction, however. Through e-mail, discussion boards, instant messaging programs, telephone and video conferencing, distance education programs can provide ample opportunities for students to interact with their counselors and other students. Training is essential when asking student services staff to advise/assist distance learners.
 7. Create a process for collecting student email addresses in the registration process. Student interaction with faculty and other students is an essential characteristic of online education. Email is one of the modes of private communication used by students to communicate with instructors and other students online. Having the ability to collect student email addresses facilitates communication both before—when instructors may need to send important information about the class—during, and after a class. The easiest way to collect email addresses is to request it on the application form.
 8. Provide an introductory course, online basic skills support and online tutoring for distance learners. Online and distance tutoring support services help students succeed and can increase student satisfaction with their online courses. These services would be most beneficial if available 24/7. Online students who require support in basic academic skills should be able to receive assistance through avenues such as basic skills courses, self-paced tutorials, and online tutoring.
 9. Provide a toll-free number for distance learner assistance. Distance learners should have easy, inexpensive access to assistance. A toll-free number provides an additional means of communication, without imposing an expense on the distance learner.

10. Establish an "early alert system" to identify students who are having difficulty, either academically or technically with a distance class. It is important to have a means of early intervention in the distance education environment. Early identification of struggling students and the referral to appropriate resources will increase the success and retention rates of distance learners.
11. Track retention and attrition rates for all distance education courses. If possible, conduct targeted surveys of students who have dropped out of distance education courses to help determine obstacles to student success in distance education environments.
12. Provide scholarship information, applications and assistance in an online environment. It is essential to provide the same opportunities for recognition and support to distance learners as are offered to on-campus students.
13. Work with Associated Student Body to connect activities or resources for distance learners as a result of purchasing an ASB card. A comprehensive virtual campus includes not only courses and student services but also student communities and extra-curricular activities. This could include membership in the Associated Student Body and involve online activities.
14. Provide an online resource for student alumni to keep in contact with the College and for the College to keep in contact with graduates. An online resource for graduates will inspire current students to continue their studies and realize the possibility of transfer to a 4-year college or university. The contact with alumni is not specific to distance learners.
15. Make web pages and distance education course materials accessible to users with disabilities. The principles of designing accessible web pages make those pages easier to access for all users and therefore benefits the entire Hartnell College online community.
16. Disabled Student Services staff, including those working with students who have learning disabilities, should be adequately trained to help students with disabilities who wish to pursue their educational goals from a distance.
17. Computer labs on campus should have available appropriate hardware, software and network configurations to enable students with disabilities to access distance education materials.
18. All distance education faculty members should be made aware of the principles of universal design and encouraged to take appropriate steps to ensure that all of their learners can adequately access their online teaching materials and that web pages meet **AT LEAST** the Level 1 web accessibility guidelines. This may be achieved through consultation with the HCC assistive technology specialist or by checking web pages with Bobby, an online software tool designed to identify barriers to accessibility.

RECOMMENDED EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT

General

The evaluation and assessment methodology for distance education courses proposed in this section will assist Hartnell College and faculty in making appropriate modifications for effective instruction. As a formative evaluation, it serves as a guide to assess the needs of the College, the instructor and the students in order to ensure a supportive environment and a positive learning experience. As a summative evaluation, it serves as an indicator of the course's effectiveness in meeting the outcomes stipulated in the course outline and assessing the student's expectations, thus helping the instructor measure its overall effectiveness.

The results of these suggested assessments will not be used to penalize or dismiss an instructor but used instead as positive and constructive criticism to improve the effectiveness of the distance education program.

The guiding principle is that distance education courses, like on-site courses, should be evaluated by the appropriate administrative personnel, peers and students in order to meet the principles for effective teaching and comply with the terms of the current contract.

Hartnell College

Before distance education courses are offered, the distance education program at Hartnell College should be evaluated by how well it meets the following recommendations:

- Infrastructure of the distance education program such as course management software, common course template and an online helpdesk for faculty and students that is available 24/7
- Faculty training (workshops, staff development, in-services)
- Peer mentoring program (ongoing)
- Student services (the same services should be offered to on-site and distance education students)
- ADA compliance of all course material and delivery
- Approval of course for appropriateness, validity, relevancy

Formative: During the semester, the effectiveness of the College's distance education program should be assessed by how well it meets the following:

- Evaluation by dean/director (guest access to class, ability to view select e-mail, conferences); evaluation by peer/s (brown-bag review sessions, discussion forum via intranet, conferences with peer evaluator); evaluation by students
- Availability of 24/7 support for faculty and students

Summative: After the course is delivered, the College should assess the effectiveness of the distance program by how well it has met the following:

- Educational effectiveness/outcomes (successful completion of the course and the level of student readiness for the next course)
- Student retention should be evaluated by statistics and attrition rates
- Student satisfaction should be evaluated by the results of evaluations and surveys posted in the course management system
- Faculty satisfaction of the course management system and support staff should be evaluated by the contract survey

Instructor Development

Before an instructor delivers a distance education course, s/he should be evaluated by how well s/he has met the following the recommendations:

- Training offered by the College (or elsewhere) by way of formal coursework in the teaching and delivery of distance education, completion of distance education coursework, or previous delivery of distance education courses
- Matching the profile of a successful online facilitator in terms of personality, attitude, commitment, and compassion

Formative: During the semester, the effectiveness of the instructor should be evaluated in terms of the following:

- Pedagogy and methodology in meeting the course requirements
- Quality and quantity of interaction, dynamic facilitation and leadership
- Ability to establish a positive class atmosphere that is conducive to student learning, collaboration, and encouragement

- Level of communication in terms of clarity and timeliness of feedback regarding the student's progress, effectiveness in reinforcing important course information, and acknowledging receipt of material

Summative: After the course is delivered, the effectiveness of the instructor should be evaluated in order to make modifications/improvement for subsequent semesters:

- Evaluation/survey posted in the course management system for students to assess the instructor's pedagogy/methodology, quality of instruction, quality/quantity of communication, knowledge of subject matter, accessibility, effective use of technology and leadership
- Self-appraisal by instructor

Course Development

Before a distance education course is delivered, it should meet the following recommendations:

- The course outline must be approved first by discipline, then by the Associate Vice President, Educational Technology and Library Services, and then by the Curriculum Committee
- Delivery mode must be ADA compliant
- Interactivity and collaboration should include discussion board, live chat, community building, engagement
- Syllabus should be clear, comprehensive, and readily available

Formative: During the semester, a mid-course evaluation/survey may be posted within the course management system to assess the following in terms of student needs and progress, identification of problem areas, and modification of course as necessary:

- The content/curriculum, including syllabus, lessons, format, delivery, relevancy, organization
- Troubleshooting to identify and correct broken links and insure the relevance and appropriateness of the material

Summative: After the course is delivered, the effectiveness of the course should be evaluated using a course management survey tool, usage records and statistics to assess the following:

- How appropriate, reasonable and relevant the assignments, pace, materials, resources, links were
- How reliable, effective, user-friendly the method of delivery was

Student Development

Before taking a distance education course, the student should be evaluated for how well s/he meets the following recommendations:

- Completion of an introduction to online learning class or demonstration of technical readiness
- Completion of an online readiness assessment which includes elements of time management, independence, self-motivation
- Demonstration of adequate written communication skills

Formative: During the semester, the student should be evaluated to assess the student's learning process via the following:

- Student performance can be measured through webfolios, projects, essays, tests and quizzes
- Student progress and satisfaction can be assessed via a "Student Cyber-Café" where students can post questions and get feedback from peers or instructor
- Student effort can be measured by their active participation in the discussion board or virtual chat room, communication with instructor, completion of assignments and timeliness
- Academic integrity of students can be assessed for plagiarism by using resources such as turnitin.com and proctoring

Summative: After the course is delivered, student achievement and satisfaction can be evaluated by grades and an electronic evaluation/survey.

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