

# **Connecticut Community Colleges Online Course Observation Guidelines**

**Prepared by the DL Course and Program Guidelines Subcommittee  
of the System Teaching & Learning Team**

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## **Introduction**

This document is informed by the Connecticut Community College System Faculty Development and Review Plan (FDRP, found at <http://www.commnet.edu/emprel/appendicesA-G.asp>). It is intended to be used as a guide for supervisors when observing online courses for the purposes of evaluating faculty performance.

According to the FDRP, “Performance indicators translate each of the four Standards of Instructional Excellence into questions that indicate the degree to which the faculty member demonstrates instructional effectiveness. The indicators are to be considered guidelines for documentation and are not intended to be used as a definitive list of required behaviors.” The FDRP connects the Standards of Instructional Excellence to the approved Instructional Observation Form used by supervisors to evaluate faculty performance in on-ground classroom, laboratory, and clinical settings.

Despite the increased number of courses offered in online and hybrid formats, the existing system wide faculty development and review process is based on principles and assumptions of the face-to-face classroom environment. These guidelines are intended to give supervisors of faculty some assistance in applying the existing review process in an online environment.

The standard Instructional Observation Form contains four questions. To answer the main questions, the evaluator may want to consider using some of the guideline questions suggested here under the main questions one through four. The guideline questions can be substituted for other considerations observed during the visit.

## INSTRUCTIONAL OBSERVATION FORM FOR ONLINE DELIVERY SETTINGS

Faculty  
Member \_\_\_\_\_

Evaluator \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Class \_\_\_\_\_

### 1. Was the lesson organized and clearly presented?

- ▶ Did the instructor present clear objectives or plans for the lesson?
- ▶ How clearly did the instructor communicate the objectives or plans to the students?
- ▶ Did the instructor carry out the objectives?
- ▶ Did the instructor present content at a pace appropriate to the length of the lesson, or the course?
- ▶ Did the instructor use various presentation formats (i.e., text, graphics, PowerPoint slides, audio, video), to appeal to different student learning styles and abilities?
- ▶ Would a student with no prior online experience know what to do when he/she logs into the course?
- ▶ Are the course syllabus and getting starting documents easy to identify?
- ▶ Are alternate contact methods, such as a college e-mail address or office telephone number, provided in case students need to contact the instructor outside of Blackboard Vista? (e.g. if Bb Vista is down).
- ▶ Does the course contain information about being an online learner and links to campus resources for online students?
- ▶ Is the course cleanly designed with a minimal number of icons and navigational choices for users?
- ▶ Are course materials viewable within three clicks when starting from the course homepage?
- ▶ Is content chunked into manageable portions? Are large blocks of text divided into smaller sections with hyperlinks and a minimum of scrolling? Are audio and video clips chunked into 5-10 minute segments?
- ▶ Is redundancy used to minimize searching for commonly sought information?
- ▶ Is the course layout, navigation and design consistent throughout? (e.g., ordering content in similar learning modules, maintaining type size, font, heading styles, and other page elements).

## **2. Describe the level of student interest and participation.**

- ▶ Does the course promote student interaction via discussions and collaborative assignments? Do students actively participate?
- ▶ Does the instructor encourage students to introduce themselves to one another informally and to post short bios and photos? Do students engage with one another?
- ▶ Does the course provide an informal discussion area for students? Do they form a community of learners?
- ▶ Are the assignments in the course learner-centered? Do students engage with the material?
- ▶ Does the instructor encourage student engagement via open-ended questions and modeling of expected behavior?
- ▶ Does the instructor provide guidance on how to receive help and ask questions? Is a course questions forum provided?
- ▶ Does the instructor encourage all students to participate and ask open-ended questions to prompt engagement and draw out shyer students?
- ▶ Does the instructor approach difficult concepts in a variety of ways: e.g., written explanations, audio explanations, use of graphs or charts?
- ▶ Does the instructor seek feedback from students and provide additional resources or explanations when necessary? E.g. “muddiest point” question in weekly journals.

## **3. Describe the quality of interpersonal relations between the instructor and students.**

- ▶ Do the students and instructor show respect for one another?
- ▶ Does the instructor provide “netiquette” guidelines for online interactions?
- ▶ Does the instructor model appropriate posts and examples of academic “argument?”
- ▶ Does the instructor provide a personal introduction to students using roster profile, biography, info page, etc., written in her/his voice rather than the policy-speak of the formal syllabus?
- ▶ Does the instructor include audio clips, a photo, or video of her/himself?
- ▶ Does the instructor provide timely and sufficient feedback on student work? (for example, within 24-48 hours, excluding weekends)
- ▶ Are students given the opportunity to apply suggested feedback through the use of drafts?
- ▶ Does the instructor use formal and informal student feedback in an ongoing basis to help plan instruction and assessments of student learning throughout the semester?
- ▶ Does the instructor alert students about when and where feedback on assessments will be provided so that students can easily access instructor comments and grades?
- ▶ Does the instructor define his/her role in the discussion forum?
- ▶ Does the instructor participate effectively in threaded discussions and respond to appropriately to student questions within the discussion area?

- ▶ Is the instructor regularly “present” in the course via announcements, discussion posts and individual feedback?
- ▶ Is the instructor’s writing style and tone clear and welcoming?
- ▶ Does the instructor personalize his/her exchanges with students by using names and salutations?

**4. What was particularly effective about the instruction? And, what specific suggestions would you make concerning how instruction could be improved?**

This section particularly addresses the *Federal Education Reauthorization Act*, which requires institutions to "establish that the student who registers in a distance education course or program is the same student who participates and completes the program and receives academic credit." NEASC is recommending the following pedagogical approaches for compliance.

Specific Suggestions Include:

- ▶ Use multiple assessment techniques for high stake exams.
- ▶ Design assessments to be frequent, varied, and authentic to the application of learning. Interactive discussions, writing assignments, quizzes, capstone projects, group work and online exams are suggested.
- ▶ Modify assessments from semester to semester.
- ▶ Rely more on written assignments and threaded discussion than objective tests.
- ▶ Become familiar with students' writing styles through online discussions.
- ▶ Use test banks, timed test delivery, randomization, no-print scripts and do not release answers until all tests have been completed.

*Questions to Consider: Technology*

Does the course include information about the following?

- ▶ The Student Orientation Shell
- ▶ Browser & computer requirements
- ▶ Help Desk contacts
- ▶ Technology specific to the course including links to plug-ins. E.g. link to download Adobe Reader to view pdf files.
- ▶ Technical literacy requirements for the course. E.g. know how to produce a PowerPoint presentation or zip a file.
- ▶ Links to resources to improve technical skills

*Questions to Consider: Resources*

- ▶ Does the instructor integrate current subject matter into the course?
- ▶ Does the course include web resources such as RSS feeds, links to relevant web sites, and podcasts?
- ▶ Does the course include multi-modal and multi-media resources?

## **SAMPLE DOCUMENT**

### **1. Was the lesson organized and clearly presented?**

Course content was clearly labeled with a minimum of icons. From the home page, which included a welcome folder that explained how to navigate the course to the weekly learning modules and individual files, the course content was clear and concise. Students would have no difficulty finding content or resources even if they had never taken an online course as each learning module followed a consistent layout. Information was never more than three clicks from the home page. Assignments were clearly written and scaffolded. The instructor included a detailed syllabus with a TOC that made it easy for students to find information about course policies and procedures, due dates, and learning goals and outcomes. The instructor also included a student contract that defined the rights and responsibilities of the students and the instructor on issues such as response time and late work.

### **2. Describe the level of student interest and participation.**

The students participated actively and enthusiastically on the discussion board encouraged by the regular posting of open-ended questions and encouragement from the instructor, who used her posts to draw more details and analysis from the student discussions. A rubric for discussions was posted for each forum so that students knew what was expected in each thread. The instructor used a learner-centered approach, assigning students to lead the discussions each week and including group research projects that required the students to engage with one another and with material on the web. The instructor published the group projects so that the groups could review and comment on each project. Most students posted at least four times a week and produced thoughtful, analytical discussions. When questions arose, the instructor encouraged students to help one another, but maintained a strong presence and provided help promptly when necessary.

### **3. Describe the quality of interpersonal relations between the instructor and students.**

The instructor was conscientious about responding promptly to student questions—usually within hours of a post. She used the Questions About the Course forum to respond to questions so that all students could benefit from her answers. Her responses were clear and detailed and her tone was friendly. She always addressed students by name and with a friendly greeting. Feedback was provided promptly and with examples and explanations designed to help the student improve on the next draft or assignment. Her tone was consistently encouraging and she often used open-ended questions to guide students to deeper levels of analysis and reflection. Models for behavior were provided via written examples and by the conduct of the instructor. The instructor's welcome included an iMovie introduction as well as items about her hobbies and interests that set the tone for the students' own introductions.

**4. What was particularly effective about the instruction? And, what specific suggestions would you make concerning how instruction could be improved?**

The instructor has created a rich learning environment in that focuses on student-centered learning and engagement. She has included many web resources in her course that make it relevant to her students' lives and relate the course material to current events and the latest developments in her discipline. The instructor has also ensured that her students have access to the technical assistance they need. Academic honesty and compliance with the Higher Education Reauthorization Act are addressed through the instructor's use of authentic assessments. The instructor is obviously comfortable with technology and constructivist pedagogy and is encouraged to continue exploring new technologies such as RSS feeds and podcasting that could further enrich her course.