The University Senate of Michigan Technological University
Proposal 12-19
Establish a Policy on Standards for Online Courses

Submitted by: the Provost's Office & Online Quality Committee

Rationale: The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) and the federal government have expectations regarding the quality of online courses and programs offered by an institution. The HLC expects its accredited members who offer distance education to follow guidelines from, or similar to, the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC). The Online Quality Committee,[1] working in conjunction with the Provost's Office, believes that meeting these expectations is also in the best interest of students enrolled in online offerings and provides the best opportunity to ensure that we, as a university, present our expertise in the best possible light, and demonstrate our commitment to high quality education regardless of delivery method.

Definitions:
- Online course (from the HLC): Courses in which at least 75 percent of the instruction and interaction occurs via electronic communication, correspondence or equivalent mechanisms, with the faculty and students physically separated from each other.
- Course Roles:
  - Instructor of Record: the faculty member who is responsible for teaching the course and the course content.
  - Facilitator: person working under the supervision of the course instructor of record, helping teach and/or manage the course
  - Course Designer: someone who builds an online course. May, or may not, be the same person as the course instructor.
- CTL: the William G. Jackson Center for Teaching and Learning at Michigan Technological University
- Peer Reviewer: a faculty or staff member who has been officially certified (as determined by the body supplying the adopted standards) to apply the online course standards.

Scope: The proposed policy concerns itself with minimum qualifications for those engaged in instructing/facilitating online courses and evaluation of course structure.

The proposed review process is in no way intended to review or comment on the discipline-based content of a course. Instead, the process is intended to verify that online courses from Michigan Tech meet widely accepted and recognized basic standards that ensure content is effectively presented and accessible to online students - which is required by our accreditor.

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Implementation Timeline:
- All instructors and facilitators of existing online courses are expected to be qualified (see procedure: section 1) within 12 months of adoption of this policy and supporting procedure.
- All online courses will be reviewed as outlined (see procedure: section 2) within 18 months of adoption of this policy, or before that course is offered a second time after adoption of this policy.

Policy Proposal

All instructors and facilitators of online courses will be qualified to teach online.

All online courses[2, 3] will meet or exceed a set of minimum standards and be peer reviewed by appropriately trained and officially certified faculty and staff peer reviewers for adherence to currently recognized best-practices for online education. One official set of internationally recognized and widely adopted standards for online courses will be adopted and used university-wide.

Reviews will be limited to aspects such as online course structure and design. Reviews will not consider domain content, which remains the purview of the instructor.

Online course reviews will address aspects of course structure and design such as:
- Course navigation facilitates ease of use
- Instructions make clear how to get started and where to find various course components
- Presence and assessment of learning objectives
- Course grading policy is stated clearly at the beginning of the course
- Course meets Michigan Tech's accessibility requirements
- Michigan Tech's student support services and resources are articulated in the course or linked to

The online course review process is a collegial, iterative, peer review process of continuous improvement. Every online course review is intended to result in the course meeting, or exceeding, the minimum standards after any necessary course revisions have been made.

Any review conducted under this policy is strictly about the course and is not about assessing faculty. Results of course peer review as outlined in this policy must not be used in an attempt to evaluate teaching effectiveness, nor be used in any part of the promotion and tenure process.

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[2] Online sections of graduate research, where graduate students are working under their advisor and no instruction or content is delivered online (listed with a schedule type of "research"), are exempted from this requirement.

[3] "All online courses" includes online courses designed and/or marketed in cooperation with outside vendors.

Supporting Procedure

1. Qualifications

In addition to meeting the general faculty qualification requirements, online instructors and facilitators will need to:
- Demonstrate that they have training in the development, delivery, and assessment of online courses. Examples of how this may be demonstrated include, but are not limited to:
  - successful completion of Michigan Tech's "Foundations of Online Teaching" course with the grade of a 'B' or better, OR
  - completion of an equivalent online teaching certification, training class, or program, OR
  - evidence of an equivalent combination of education and experience of teaching well designed online courses that met similar, or more rigorous, standards
    - experience may be demonstrated by evidence such as, but not limited to: demonstrating that previously taught online courses meet adopted standards, having taught courses certified to meet well known standards at another institution with similar policies, or having received commendations for online teaching.
- AND, show proficiency in operating the course learning management system. Examples of how this may be demonstrated include, but are not limited to:
  - successful completion of eLearning's Canvas Introductory Workshop series, OR
  - evidence of an equivalent combination of training and/or experience sufficient to provide adequate skill using the course learning management system as a teacher.

Instructors who believe they have achieved the qualifications (detailed above) for online instruction can submit their credentials to the provost's office. Final determination of qualifications will be completed by the provost's office in consultation with the CTL. A list of approved equivalent trainings/courses that meet the requirements of this policy (no further review required) will be available on the CTL website. The provost's office will maintain a list of instructors approved to teach an online course at Michigan Tech.

2. Reviews

2.1 Faculty Support

Upon request, direct assistance with course development or modification will be available from the CTL and trained peer reviewers. A rubric outlining the adopted standards will also be made available to assist with online course development.

2.2 Review Timing

Peer review for new and existing online courses will occur as outlined below:
- NEW online courses (those developed after the approval of this policy and procedure) will be reviewed before the course is offered a second time.
- EXISTING online courses (those where development and initial offering predate the approval of this policy and procedure) will be reviewed within 18 months of policy approval or before the course is offered for a second time.

Thereafter, the course should be reviewed again every three years or if substantial changes have been made.

Reviews may be initiated at any time at the request of the instructor.

2.3 Peer Reviewer Selection

Reviews will be conducted, in cooperation with the course instructor and/or designer, by two peer reviewers appointed by the department chair or dean with input from the instructor/designer. A list of eligible reviewers will be available on the CTL website.

2.4 Review Completion

Reviews are intended to be iterative with open dialog between the instructor/designer and review team, especially after the initial standards rubric evaluation and as modifications are made.

Online course review will be considered complete when standards have been met as determined by peer reviewers.

In the case where the instructor declines to implement the recommended revisions needed to meet the minimum standards, the review will be considered finished but the course will be determined to have not met minimum standards.

3. Use of Reviews

Peer reviews are conducted to provide feedback on how course design can be improved for online delivery. Copies of the review rubric, in addition to any written comments from the peer reviewers, will be provided to the instructor/designer (whoever is most directly responsible for course design) of the course being reviewed.

Upon completion of the review (when either the minimum standards have been met or the instructor declines to implement the recommended revisions to meet minimum standards), the review team will report whether the course met, or did not meet, minimum standards to the provost's office and to the department chair or school dean.

In the case that a review finishes and the course does not meet minimum standards, copies of the review rubric and written comments will additionally be provided by the review team to the provost's office so materials can be used to inform the next review. Materials will not be collected nor kept by the provost's office when courses are determined to meet or surpass standards.

Any review conducted under this policy is strictly about the course and is not about assessing faculty. Results of course peer review as outlined in this policy and supporting procedure must not be used in an attempt to evaluate teaching effectiveness, nor be used in any part of the promotion and tenure process.