

## Implementing Quality Guidelines in Distributed Learning

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### **Abstract**

In 2002, the Ohio Learning Network (OLN), the State's e-learning consortium, convened a Task Force on Quality in Distance Learning to explore issues of quality in e-learning. The Task Force was comprised of OLN staff and twelve representatives from ten institutional members of the OLN. They were charged with developing guidelines and recommending an implementation plan for insuring quality in distributed learning across OLN member institutions. The resulting report titled, "*Quality Learning in Ohio and at a Distance*," includes practical guidelines along with more theoretical, new models for e-Learning. It is prefaced by a critical discussion about what constitutes quality in distance learning and includes strategies for implementing and assessing quality in distance learning. This paper summarizes the Task Forces work and the report. The full report can be downloaded off the OLN Website at: [http://www.olin.org/about\\_olin/pdf/Quality\\_TF.pdf](http://www.olin.org/about_olin/pdf/Quality_TF.pdf).

### **The Task Force**

The Task Force was chaired by Susan E. Metros, Professor and Deputy CIO of the Ohio State University, and was comprised of OLN staff and twelve representatives from ten institutional members of the OLN (see Appendix I). It met over a six-month period during 2002. Meeting times were used to discuss the various components of the charge and to draft responses. The members also shared relevant resources with each other at these meetings, in addition to using a listserv. During meetings they worked both in large and small groups. Between meetings the chair sent out the resulting drafts for comments and revisions. The final report was researched and drafted by small groups assigned to specific sections. This work was completed via E-mail. OLN staff compiled these documents into a final report. In October, the Academic Outreach and Professional Development committees vetted this report. The Chair of the Task Force presented the final report to the OLN Governing Board in December 2002. The Board accepted the report and further charged the Task Force with developing an implementation plan for the recommendations to be presented in March 3, 2003.

### **The Charge**

The OLN Governing Board charged the OLN Task Force on Quality in Distance Learning with six tasks that addressed a broad sweep of quality issues concerning both the content and delivery of distance learning. However, task force members unanimously agreed that OLN's role was to address quality of distance learning *delivery*, but not quality of program or course content. Their rationale was that academic institutions already have in place assessment indicators and curriculum approval processes addressing the academic quality of their offerings. The Executive

Director accepted a revised the charge as follows:

1. Describe the essential conditions for quality e-learning to be created and to be offered for credit or noncredit by Ohio's colleges and universities.
2. Review the existing OLN Principles of Good Practice and recommend changes or additions to these principles.
3. Stimulate the creation of delivery methods for quality content by Ohio faculty.
4. Create a strategy for the professional development of faculty and information technology support staff that focuses on learning processes associated with technology-enhanced learning and uses the OLN Principles of Good Practice.
5. Investigate new models of technology-enhanced teaching and learning, including the possibilities of shared content, storage, and identification and usage of such content.
6. Identify and disseminate information about quality learning and practices to home institutions and a broader global audience.

### **The Report**

The Task Force carefully researched and provided compelling statements about e-learning. In addition, the Task Force premised their work on three strong basic beliefs of its members. First, e-learning programs and courses, just like their traditional counterparts, need to be academically rigorous and deep and result in appropriate learning. Second, faculty and students must acknowledge that these new and emerging methods for delivering educational content bring new and different teaching and learning challenges. Finally, quality delivered e-learning requires substantial start-up costs.

The Task Force report is organized around the six charges from the OLN Governing Board. For each charge, the Task Force provided one or more recommendations (see Appendix II). The implementation plan for the recommendations was developed under separate cover.

Two major themes emerge from the recommendations. First, OLN should provide leadership in three ways. Through a series of request for proposals, they should stimulate the creation of, experimentation in developing, and assessment of quality in the delivery of e-learning by Ohio faculty. Further, given the challenges of understanding and effectively utilizing new technologies, OLN should assist in coordinating professional development opportunities for member institutions. And finally, OLN should provide leadership in the identification and dissemination of information about new models that ensure quality in e-learning.

The second theme emerged out of the revisions to the *OLN Principles of Good Practice* (Appendix III). This theme focused on quality in e-learning as a shared responsibility. OLN is responsible for providing leadership to assist institutions, instructional faculty, and learners. Institutions are responsible for providing appropriate policies and procedures to ensure quality for any course, including e-learning offerings and provide appropriate student support services. Instructional faculty and support staff are responsible for developing and implementing delivery methods to ensure quality. Both institutions and instructional faculty should work together to assess learning outcomes and to implement improvements.

### **The Implementation Plan**

The implementation plan consists of a priority ranking of the recommendations along with a matrix outlining the required levels of commitment by both OLN and its member institutions. Commitment includes funding, staffing, and other types of resources. The plan also tracks the progress of existing and planned activities that address and carry out the recommendations. This document will be available after March 3, 2003.

### **Concluding Comments**

The Task Force Report “*Quality Learning in Ohio and at a Distance*” implies that there are considerable challenges for the State of Ohio and its institutions of higher education. The report provides a framework for state agencies and institutions to think about shared responsibility in providing education at a distance. It also provides a stage for ongoing discussions about how to best ensure quality in the delivery of education offered at a distance. Such discussions from member institutions and other interested parties can provide valuable insight into how best to move Ohio forward in educating its citizens.

## **Appendix I**

### **OLN Task Force on Quality in Distance Learning Members**

#### **Institutional Members:**

Susan E. Metros, The Ohio State University  
Professor, Deputy CIO and Executive Director, Educational Technology

Chuck Allport, Cedarville University  
Assistant to the Academic Vice President

Muriel Ballou, Ohio University  
Director, Ohio University without Boundaries

Tom Erney, Columbus State Community College  
Director, Instructional Services

Jim Godfrey, AIM Center – Sinclair CC/UD  
Executive Director

John Hirschbuhl, University of Akron  
Director, Learning Technologies

Jim Houdeshell, Sinclair Community College  
Professor, Quality Engineering Technology

Alan Kalish, Ohio State University  
Program Director, Faculty and TA Development

Mark McBride, Miami University  
Director, Faculty Development

Jim Pollicita, Miami University  
Director, Continuing Education & Summer Session

Doris Salis, University of Findlay  
Dean, Adult and Continuing Education

Tom Sink, Owens Community College  
Dean, Library Services

#### **OLN Staff:**

Kate Carey, Executive Director

Sheryl Hansen, Director, Professional Development Programs

George Steele, Director, Degree Completion Programs

Julie Clemens, Graduate Administrative Associate

## Appendix II

### Charges and Recommendations

#### Charge 1:

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**Describe the essential conditions for quality e-learning to be created and to be offered for credit or noncredit by Ohio's colleges and universities.**

#### **Recommendation:**

*Ohio colleges and universities should use the policies and procedures that it has in place for the design, approval, assessment, and revision for all courses, whether they are taught face-to-face, blended, or at a distance. Institutions, faculty, and administration also should continue to revise these policies and procedures to reflect current best practices and tools, adapted to fit local needs and abilities. OLN should provide leadership and support in the development and dissemination of tools and models for such revisions.*

#### Charge 2:

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**Review the existing OLN Principles of Good Practice and recommend changes or additions to these principles.**

#### **Recommendation:**

*The Task Force submits the following revised OLN Principles of Good Practice for the adoption by the Governing Board and implementation by all OLN member institutions. The Task Force recommends that OLN staff work with each campus to ensure the principles are followed and that any courses created with OLN or OBR funds are measured against these Principles.*

*Updated OLN Principles of Good Practice strengthen activities by Ohio administrators and faculty in the creation and delivery of e-learning. OLN should develop a method to "track" the courses that are meeting the OLN Principles of Good Practice, work with campuses to meet those Principles, and discontinue support/promotion of the courses not meeting the Principles.*

#### Charge 3:

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**Stimulate the creation of delivery methods for quality content by Ohio faculty.**

#### **Recommendation:**

*OLN should implement the following funding programs and quality reviews during the next two years to create appropriate methodologies for Ohio faculty to create and deliver content. Assessment of these projects should be completed within one year of the project conclusion.*

- *Fund a Request for Proposals to create content in areas where content gaps exist and in areas that meets the needs of the citizenry of Ohio.*
- *Fund a Request for Proposals that supports new and emerging areas of delivery methods, including but not limited to learning objects, modules, and other digital modes.*

- *Establish a review panel of state and national experts that are capable of recognizing quality content and sponsor appropriate awards: recognition in the OhioLearns! catalog, certificates to faculty and design teams, etc.*
- *Create a “Best Practices” distinction by convening a review panel of state and national experts to establish criteria (using this committee's definitions of quality), identify courses, modules, etc., and highlight them on the OLN Website, in OhioLearns!, and in other national collections.*

#### **Charge 4:**

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**Create a strategy for the professional development of faculty and information technology support staff to focus on learning processes associated with technology-enhanced learning and using the OLN Principles of Good Practice.**

**Recommendation:**

*Every Ohio college and university involved in e-learning should support the appropriate professional development education of faculty and staff (including administrators), which fits with the culture and nature of each campus. **When appropriate, OLN should assist in coordinating professional development opportunities across member campuses.***

#### **Charge 5:**

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**Investigate new models of technology-enhanced teaching and learning, including the possibilities of shared content, storage, and identification and usage of such content.**

**Recommendation:**

*Through OLN, Ohio’s higher education institutions should continue thoughtful experimentation and assessment of new educational models that support innovative ways to deliver quality education.*

*OLN should serve as a conduit for identifying and supporting collaborative research opportunities between its member institutions and OhioLINK, Ohio Super Computing Center and OARnet, institutions that each plays an integral role in knowledge management and delivery. In addition, distance learning courses listed in OhioLearns! that utilize new modes of teaching and learning should be assessed against the OLN Principles of Good Practice. Conversely, the OLN Principles of Good Practice should be periodically updated to take into consideration these new ways of delivering education at a distance.*

#### **Charge 6:**

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**Identify and disseminate information about quality learning and practices to home institutions and a broader global audience.**

**Recommendation:**

*Identify resources and implement actions.*

- *OLN website contains many reviewed resources for faculty. OLN should maintain a dynamic site by updating it regularly with teaching community assistance.*
  - *TECPD community meetings share faculty best practices in face-to-face and online environments. OLN should continue support and development of the*

*TECPD group and incorporate learning from that group into the statewide teaching and learning community.*

- *OLN Conference annually brings Ohio's faculty together to learn from each other. The Conference should grow to involve the four higher education initiatives (OLN, OhioLINK, OARnet and OSC) and include programming to attract more faculty and graduate students. Learning perspectives and needs should be considered when inviting vendors to the conference.*
- *OLN Quality Task Force report should be shared throughout Ohio, including:*
  - *Soliciting the Chancellor of the Ohio Board of Regents support of this report and involving him in disseminating this report to a public forum.*
  - *Sponsoring sessions to present this report at the OLN and OCHEA Conferences in March 2003.*
  - *Encouraging Task Force members and others to submit papers about e-learning quality issues to national and regional conferences, including EDUCAUSE.*
  - *"Pushing" information to campus communities.*
    - *Host Campus meetings to discuss and inculcate the revised OLN Principles of Good Practice. An OLN Regional Coordinator and a campus representative would co-host a two-hour meeting of selected campus individuals representing the Provost's Office, Distance Learning, Faculty Development, Student Services and selected faculty innovators.*
    - *Suggest campus teaching and learning centers link directly to the report.*
    - *Utilize Ohio SchoolNet, the State Department of Education and other K-16 entities as dissemination mechanisms for sharing the Quality Task Force recommendations with the K-16 community.*

## Appendix III

### OLN Principles of Good Practice – Revised December 2002

The OLN Principles of Good Practice, the cornerstone of this electronic access to Ohio higher education, were developed to guide institutions in content creation and delivery and to assure students that content in the *Ohio Learns!* catalog meets their education and professional needs. The Principles draw upon the work of other organizations, such as the North Central Accrediting Association, the Southwestern Ohio Council for Higher Education, the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications, and the Southern Regional Educational Board. All courses and programs to be listed in the online course catalog have been reviewed against the OLN Principles of Good Practice by the offering institutions.

#### *Institutional Responsibilities*

1. The institution offering e-learning programs or courses must be accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting body and authorized to operate in the state where the program or course originates.
2. The institution's e-learning programs and courses also must meet the appropriate accreditation standards and criteria.
3. The institution offering the e-learning program or course is responsible for maintaining quality when collaborating within a consortium.
4. These principles are applicable to all e-learning programs and courses, which includes degree or certificate programs and credit or non-credit courses.
5. The institution offering the e-learning program or course is responsible for reviewing educational programs and providing and ensuring continued compliance with the OLN Principles of Good Practice.
6. The institution will ensure that the student registered in and authenticated to take a course is the student actually completing the work.
7. The institution will follow the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act.
8. The institution will provide systems to comply with Section 508 of the Americans with Disabilities Act.
9. The institution will provide faculty and staff development to support instructional and technological strategies.
10. The institution will allow students the opportunity to complete a degree or certificate program, once started, if the e-learning program is terminated or phased out.
11. The institution shall disseminate advertising, recruiting, and admissions materials and resources clearly and accurately representing the program and the services available.

#### *Instructional Responsibilities*

##### **Instruction and Courses**

1. Academic review, approval, oversight and student outcomes are consistent across the institution's academic offerings, i.e. learning outcomes meet or exceed established instructional curricular standards.
2. E-learning programs and courses of study are rigorous and deep and result in appropriate learning outcomes.
3. E-learning programs are coherent and complete.
4. E-learning provides for appropriate interaction between faculty and students and among students. Qualified faculty provide appropriate facilitation and assessment of e-learning opportunities.
5. Instructors comply with institutional practices for course authentication to ensure student coursework is completed by the student enrolled.
6. Faculty, graduate students, and staff avail themselves of institutional resources about instructional strategies, pedagogies, and teaching innovations, especially related to e-learning.
7. E-learning faculty and instructors work with instructional designers and utilize other campus resources and ensure their e-learning offerings meet or exceed Section 508 of the Americans with Disabilities Act standards and are accessible to all learners.
8. A team approach to developing, facilitating and assessing e-learning offerings is utilized. Team members include experts in subject and content matter, assessment, instructional design and development, software/hardware and help desk personnel, as well as students.
9. Faculty, graduate students, and staff follow institutional intellectual property and copyright policies and abide by all related federal laws.

### **Student Support**

1. The program or course provides students with clear, complete, and timely information on the curriculum, course and degree requirements, nature of faculty/student interaction, prerequisite technology competencies and skills, technical equipment requirements, availability of academic support services, library resources, financial aid resources, costs and payment policies, and rights to accommodation based on special needs as defined in the institution's student handbook.
2. Enrolled students have reasonable and adequate access to the range of student services and resources appropriate to support their learning as defined in the institution's student handbook.
3. Institutions must provide students with information, assistance, and assessment of student capability in the following areas:
  - Students must have access to information about the curriculum, the course and degree program, and the baseline technology needed for success.
  - Students must have access to assistance with academics, career, admissions, financial aid, and technology.

- Students must have access to academic assessment in the form of placement testing and clearly stated prerequisites, and students must have access to technical assessment to determine if students are prepared to engage in e-learning.

### *Assessment Practices*

1. E-learning courses or programs should offer equivalent academic standards and resources as compared to courses or programs offered through traditional delivery methods.
2. The institution or consortium agrees to evaluate annually the outcomes of the offerings in *Ohio Learns!* Data collected should be used for continuous improvement in courses, degrees and certificates.
3. The institution or consortium agrees to evaluate the effectiveness of the e-learning programs and courses, including annual assessment of student learning, student recruitment and retention, and student and faculty satisfaction.
4. Upon completion of the course, certificate, or program, an assessment and documentation of student achievement should be completed.
5. Interaction and mediation between faculty and student and among students is required.
6. Student services, including advisement and information about admissions, registration, scheduling and financial aid, should be an element of the annual assessment.