

SREB

*Educational Technology
Cooperative*

Standards for Quality Online Courses

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Southern
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Standards for Quality Online Courses

“All recent high school graduates have solid academic preparation and are ready for post-secondary education and a career.”

Goals for Education: Challenge to Lead, Southern Regional Education Board

Introduction

The rapid growth of online learning in the past 10 years has given middle grades and high school students greater access to academic courses than ever before. It also has focused increasing attention on what constitutes a quality online course. The understanding of what is required to be an effective online teacher and how to design an online course has deepened significantly. The technology used to access and provide online courses has improved. Equally important, education leaders and teachers have gained greater understanding of the attributes of today’s students, who have access to and can use technology to pursue opportunities and information never before available to them. For many students, online access has changed the way they see the world and the way they work and play. Consideration of these student issues is now critical in designing and delivering quality online instruction.

Quality online courses must include clearly defined curriculum content, effective and easy-to-use ways for students to interact with and learn the content, and be designed to attract student interest. The courses must utilize technology that enables the teacher to customize each student’s learning experience through tools and formats such as video, interactive features, resources and links to related information. A quality online teacher, working with students in a well-designed and well-developed course, is also essential to success.

The SREB publication *Standards for Quality Online Teaching* outlines 11 standards states can use to guide academic preparation, content knowledge, online skills and delivery, and other elements of quality online teaching. As a companion report, this publication examines the essential components of quality online courses in the context of today’s learners and the increased emphasis on accountability. It also addresses the need for state-level policies regarding online course quality.

Several issues should be factored into setting appropriate standards for quality online courses. The courses must include rigorous content that is aligned with the state's academic standards and that enables teachers to adjust the scope and sequence of instruction to meet students' academic and learning needs. Ease of use is also important so students can focus on the content of the course and not be unnecessarily distracted by extraneous information or graphic displays. In keeping with what is known about the importance of interaction between students and their teacher and among students, the courses should provide as many options as possible to facilitate interaction. Assessments — both student self-assessments and teacher assessments of student progress — should be built into each course.

The Standards

The standards for quality online courses in this report were developed by knowledgeable, experienced resource persons from K-12 and postsecondary education, drawn from national and regional organizations, SREB state departments of education, and colleges and universities. Through extensive collaboration and sharing with SREB staff over many months, their work culminated in specific standards that SREB states can use to define and implement quality online courses. Through broad acceptance of these standards, SREB states will be able to provide more students with the courses they need, regardless of where the students and teachers reside. In addition, SREB states will be able to collaborate by sharing development and training practices and developing a pool of online content and course modules. This sharing will be made available through the SREB-SCORE initiative.

Considerable progress in developing policies to govern the use and review of online courses has been made in the 16 SREB states. Most SREB state virtual schools have developed regulations, policies and procedures governing the use and review of online courses. Many of these states based their review standards on the earlier SREB report *Essential Elements for Web-Based Courses for High School Students* and its companion report, *Essential Principles of Quality*. Since their publication, a growing body of research and practices for effective online course design and use has evolved. This information is available on the SREB Educational Technology Cooperative state virtual schools Web pages.

Course Content

- **Standard:** *The course provides online learners with engaging learning experiences that promote their mastery of content and are aligned with state content standards or nationally accepted content.*

Academic Content Standards and Assessments

Indicators

- Goals and objectives are measurable and clearly state what the participants will know or be able to do at the end of the course.
- Content and assignments are aligned with state content standards or nationally accepted content standards set for Advanced Placement courses, technology, computer science, or other courses whose content is not included in state standards.
- Tasks and assessments align with the required local, state and national assessments that are associated with the course.
- Content and assignments are of sufficient rigor, depth and breadth to teach the standards being addressed.
- Information literacy and communication skills are incorporated and taught as an integral part of the curriculum.
- Sufficient learning resources and materials to increase student success are available to students before the course begins.

Course Overview and Introduction

Indicators

- A clear, complete course overview and syllabus are included in the course.
- Requirements are consistent with course goals, representative of the scope of the course and clearly stated.
- Information is provided to students, parents and mentors on how to communicate with the online teacher and course provider, including information on the process for these communications.

Legal and Acceptable Use Policies

Indicators

- Issues associated with the use of copyrighted materials are addressed.

- Academic integrity and netiquette (Internet etiquette) expectations regarding lesson activities, discussions, e-mail communications and plagiarism are clearly stated.
- Privacy policies are clearly stated.

Teacher Resources

Indicators

- Instructor resources and notes are included.
- Assessment and assignment answers and explanations are included.

Instructional Design

- **Standard:** *The course uses learning activities that engage students in active learning; provides students with multiple learning paths to master the content based on student needs; reflects multicultural education and is accurate, current and free of bias; and provides ample opportunities for interaction and communication student to student, student to instructor and instructor to student.*

Instructional and Audience Analysis

Indicator

- The design reflects a clear understanding of student needs and incorporates varied ways to learn and multiple levels of mastery of the curriculum.

Course, Unit and Lesson Design

Indicators

- The course is organized into units and lessons.
- The unit overview describes the objectives, activities and resources that frame the unit. It includes a description of the activities and assignments that are central to the unit.
- Each lesson includes a lesson overview, content and activities, assignments and assessments to provide multiple learning opportunities for students to master the content.
- The course is designed to teach concepts and skills that students will retain over time.

Instructional Strategies and Activities

Indicators

- Instruction includes activities that engage students in active learning.
- Instruction provides students with multiple learning paths to master the content, based on student needs.
- The teacher engages students in learning activities that address a variety of learning styles and preferences.
- The course provides opportunities for students to engage in higher-order thinking, critical-reasoning activities and thinking in increasingly complex ways.
- Content reflects multicultural education and is accurate, current and free of bias.
- The teacher can adapt learning activities to accommodate students' needs.
- Readability levels, written language assignments and mathematical requirements are appropriate for the course content and the students.

Communication and Interaction

Indicators

- The design provides opportunities for appropriate instructor-student interaction, including timely and frequent feedback about student progress.
- The course provides opportunities for appropriate instructor-student and student-student interaction to foster mastery and application of the material and a plan for monitoring that interaction.

Resources and Materials

Indicators

- The course provides opportunities for appropriate student interaction with the content to foster mastery and application of the material.
- Students have access to resources that enrich the course content.

Student Assessment

- **Standard:** *The course uses multiple strategies and activities to assess student readiness for and progress in course content and provides students with feedback on their progress.*

Evaluation Strategies

Indicators

- Student evaluation strategies are consistent with course goals and objectives, representative of the scope of the course and clearly stated.
- The structure includes adequate and appropriate methods and procedures to assess students' mastery of content.

Feedback

Indicators

- Ongoing and frequent assessments are conducted to verify each student's readiness for the next lesson.
- Assessment strategies and tools make the student continuously aware of his/her progress in class and mastery of the content beyond letter grades.

Assessment Resources and Materials

Indicators

- Assessment materials provide the teacher with the flexibility to assess students in a variety of ways.
- Grading rubrics and models of partially to fully completed assignments are provided to the teacher.
- Grading policy and practices are easy to understand.

Technology

- **Standard:** *The course takes full advantage of a variety of technology tools, has a user-friendly interface and meets accessibility standards for interoperability and access for learners with special needs.*

Course Architecture

Indicators

- Architecture permits the online teacher to add content, activities and assessments to extend learning opportunities.

- The course accommodates multiple school calendars; e.g., block, 4X4 and traditional schedules.

User Interface

Indicators

- The course is easy to navigate.
- The course makes maximum use of the capabilities of the online medium and makes resources available by alternative means; e.g., video, CDs and podcasts.

Technology Requirements and Interoperability

Indicators

- Hardware, Web browser and software requirements are specified.
- Prerequisite skills in the use of technology are identified.
- Appropriate content-specific tools and software are utilized.
- Interoperability technical standards allow sharing content among different learning management systems.
- Interoperability technical standards ensure sharing of questions, assessments and results with others.

Accessibility

Indicators

- The course meets universal design principles, Section 508 standards and W3C guidelines to ensure access for all students.
- Online textbooks used in a course meet nationally endorsed standards (NIMAS) for publishers to ensure distribution of accessible, alternative versions of textbooks and other instructional materials.

Technical Support

Indicators

- The course provider offers the course teacher, students and school coordinator assistance with technical support and course management.
- The course provider offers orientation training.

Course Evaluation and Management ---

- **Standard:** *The course is evaluated regularly for effectiveness, using a variety of assessment strategies, and the findings are used as a basis for improvement. The course is kept up to date, both in content and in the application of new research on course design and technologies.*

Assessing Course Effectiveness

Indicators

- Results of peer review and student evaluations of courses are available.
- The course provider uses multiple ways of assessing course effectiveness.
- The course is evaluated regularly for effectiveness, and the findings are used as a basis for improvement.

Course Updates

Indicator

- The course is updated periodically to ensure timeliness.

Accreditation

Indicators

- The course provider is authorized to operate in the state in which the course is offered.
- The online teacher meets the professional teaching standard established by a state licensing agency, or the teacher has academic credentials in the field in which he or she is teaching and has been trained to teach online and to use the course.

Data Security

Indicator

- Student information remains confidential, as required by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).

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