

## Online Program Best Practices

This document provides an overview of the best practices in course design, grounded in research and evidence-based practice, for online programs. These best practices form the foundation of a course and promote continuity in the student experience. OPLR instructional designers and faculty partners work together to incorporate these practices into the course development process.

Course Elements	Best Practices
<b>Primary Focus</b>	
<p><b>Competencies</b> are the foundation of course design. They define the specific skills, behaviors, and knowledge that students must master. <i>Also commonly referred to as learning outcomes, objectives, or goals.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Must be measurable</li> <li>• Are directly linked to assessments</li> <li>• When possible, should connect to real-world applications</li> </ul>
<p><b>Authentic assessments</b> ask students to perform tasks that are analogous to those found in actual professional or real-world settings.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enable competency evaluation</li> <li>• Introduce a high degree of authenticity mirroring real-world applications</li> <li>• Include practice and feedback opportunities (formative assessments) that can lead to summative assessments</li> </ul>
<p><b>Learning resources</b> consist of readings, multimedia, and other resources that are the primary methods used to help students successfully prepare for assessments.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Align with competencies and assessments</li> <li>• Vary in format (e.g., text vs. video)</li> <li>• Listed with short descriptions connecting them to learning goals</li> </ul>
<p><b>Alignment</b> ensures that all resources, assessments, and competencies have an established relationship with each other.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expressed through an alignment grid or course map</li> </ul>
<p><b>Rubrics</b> are used to clearly communicate expectations, provide feedback to students, and aid in specifying the level of performance a student has achieved.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Paired with authentic assessments and other performance-based activities</li> <li>• Clearly state the criteria used to evaluate student performance</li> <li>• Provide feedback reinforced by written, student-specific commentary</li> </ul>

<p><b>Syllabi</b> provide course overviews and expectations consistently across an entire program.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Apply a standard design across all courses in a program</li> <li>● Include the following sections:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Course Description</li> <li>● Course Competencies</li> <li>● Required Textbooks and/or Learning Resources</li> <li>● Required Technology</li> <li>● Faculty Information</li> <li>● Calendar</li> <li>● Grading Expectations</li> <li>● Academic Standards</li> <li>● Accessibility Guidelines</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p><b>Faculty-student engagement</b> is the communication between faculty and students through effective feedback, clear expectations, and connections to the real world.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Documents communication and grading turnaround expectations (from within syllabus)</li> <li>● Provides customized, written feedback for assessments and other learning activities</li> <li>● Incorporates timely information on current events as these relate to course material</li> </ul>
<p><b>Legal compliance</b> in online course development entails creating content that is accessible to all students and follows the laws governing copyright and fair use.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● ADA compliance examples include but are not limited to:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Transcripts are provided for all recorded content.</li> <li>○ Text documents are searchable.</li> <li>○ Tables have headers.</li> <li>○ Images have alt-text descriptions.</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Copyright controls how a work can or cannot be distributed.</li> <li>● Fair use is an exception to copyright that allows unlicensed use of materials in certain circumstances. Four factors determine fair use:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ The purpose and character of the use</li> <li>○ The nature of the work</li> <li>○ The amount and substantiality of the portion used</li> <li>○ The effect on the market</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

<p><b>Course content</b> is selected and developed in a way that maximizes student engagement, representation, voice, and agency.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students are provided with choices for how they demonstrate their understanding of the content.</li> <li>• Diverse perspectives are incorporated when selecting the learning resources.</li> <li>• Course content creates space for students to share their lived experiences.</li> <li>• The concepts of equity, diversity, and inclusion are intentionally incorporated into the development and/or curation of course content.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Secondary Focus</b></p>	
<p><b>Student-course engagement</b> is how students interact with course components such as assessments, readings, and multimedia.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Includes active learning opportunities (e.g., case studies, problem-solving, and current-event assignments)</li> <li>• Limits the use of passive activities such as viewing PowerPoints, taking quizzes, and watching lengthy videos</li> </ul>
<p><b>Student-student engagement</b> is communication and collaboration among students.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides a variety of meaningful opportunities for regular student interaction with peers (e.g., group projects, discussions, and debates)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Media and technology</b> elements are used to enhance and support the online learning experience.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selected <b>after</b> instructional goal(s) have been determined to facilitate those goal(s)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Tertiary Focus</b></p>	
<p><b>Objective assessments</b> usually consist of specific, discrete questions and answers in the form of multiple-choice or true/false questions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Used primarily for practice and student self-evaluation</li> <li>• Generally not appropriate for competency evaluation</li> </ul>