

Evaluation of University of West Georgia's EdS Online Degree Program

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## EVALUATION OF UWG EDS PROGRAM

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### Evaluation of University of West Georgia's EdS Online Degree Program

As part of the University of West Georgia (UWG)'s college of education and department of educational technology and foundations, the Specialist in Education with a Major in Instructional Technology, Media & Design - Instructional Technology is a 27 credit hour program taught completely online. As an online degree program for a degree that focuses on online learning, ongoing, high-quality evaluation is necessary. While the university and upper level administration are certainly invested in the quality of online courses, perhaps especially as it relates to student retention, the stakeholders most invested in this program would be the faculty, course designers (if not the same as faculty), and students.

As a whole, students enrolled in the program should meet four objectives:

1. Candidates will synthesize research on issues and trends in instructional technology.
2. Candidates will apply theories of change to introduce innovations into educational settings.
3. Candidates will apply systemic approaches to close identified gaps in human performance.
4. Candidates will propose innovative technology-based solutions to an identified instructional need.

This paper will outline a three-prong approach to assessing the overall quality of the program by looking at overall course quality, student engagement and outcomes, and faculty engagement.

### **Course Level Quality Metrics and Rubrics**

Beyond the general need for excellence in all educational endeavors, online learning is at a particular disadvantage due to the perception that online learning is sub par to in person

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learning, even among instructors teaching online, and the sordid history of online for-profit diploma mill schools (Latchem, 2014, p. 312). As the market for distance education continues to expand, there is a need for well-designed and high quality courses.

It is important to note how intertwined the categories of course quality, learner outcomes and engagement, and faculty engagement really are. Courses where students are highly engaged in the content are probably high quality courses, and positive learner outcomes may cause students to perceive a course as high quality. Faculty engagement generally increases the overall quality of a course. In short, some data sources will overlap because the concepts measured overlap.

For the purpose of this evaluation, all rubrics, reviews, and checklists will be content that UWG has created.

### **Goals**

Based on a review of the materials available on UWG's various websites, UWG prizes clarity of course information and communication between faculty and students first and foremost, followed by course navigation and design, and a variety of assessments, as these qualities are present in UWG's 5-star online course review (n.d.), CTL course review (n.d.) and quality assurance in online courses document (2015). Beyond these basics, the review tools vary somewhat, with the CTL course review being a bit more holistic and an excellent source of qualitative information, while the 5-star rubric focuses more on the technological expectations and provides a quantitative assessment of course quality.

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The 5-star rubric is modeled off of the Quality Matters rubrics, and contains the following sections: course introduction and information, learning materials/content, assessment and evaluation, instructional design and interaction, and course technology, innovation, and accessibility. The CTL course review pulls from the seven principles of best practice, and these practices focus on contact, reciprocity and cooperation, active learning, prompt feedback, time on task, high expectations, and respect for diversity.

### **Data**

All new courses must be reviewed prior to online implementation, either through the more generalized review set for by the suggestions in the quality assurance for online courses (2015) or through the more standardized 5-star rubric (n.d.). For the purpose of data collection, all 17 MEDT courses affiliated with the EdS program will be evaluated using the 5 star rubric. Unless there are significant variations between different sections and/or different instructors, the courses will be evaluated independent of potential instructors but information on the original designers should be noted.

**Qualitative Data:** Comment sections for the standards of the 5-star rubric. Comments on student formative assessments and summative course evaluations

**Quantitative Data.** Points earned for each of the standards on the 5-star rubric. Any quantitative data, such as likert scales, used on evaluations.

### **Data Analysis**

Due to the smaller size of the department, it should be feasible to complete a 5-star rubric for each of the courses affiliated with the degree. However, due to limitations of the 5-star rubric,

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discussed in future sections, this should not be the only metric used to measure quality. Students should be able to complete comprehensive formative and summative evaluations about the courses, and the data from both compared. Faculty should have access to their data, with a select few, such as faculty chairs having access to all. When comparing the rubrics (i.e. the set-up) with the course evaluations and student surveys, faculty should take note of any specific clusters, patterns, or trends that may point to areas of strength or weakness. Care must be taken to differentiate between the course designer and the instructor -- a poorly designed course might result in low scores on student evaluations no matter who the instructor. Student surveys may also show areas where the priorities of the rubric and the priorities of students differ; certain aspects and parts of a course may not contribute as much to overall satisfaction as the rubric would imply.

Again, since course quality, student engagement, and faculty engagement are so intertwined that data and analysis for one aspect will definitely spill into the other categories. For example, low quality courses will probably not lead to many positive learner outcomes, and it would be difficult for students to have high levels of student-instructor interactions/engagement without high levels of faculty engagement. Therefore, all data analysis should be looked at holistically, not individually.

### **Learner Outcomes and Engagement**

It's a maxim every teacher knows: engaged learners are better learners. Multiple studies have found positive correlations between student-instructor interaction, student-student interaction, and student-content interaction and students' overall satisfaction of an online course

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(Change & Smith, 2008; Kuo et al., 2014), and, in fact, Jagers and Xu (2016) state that “[n]early every published online quality framework has emphasized the importance of interpersonal communication and collaboration.” Learning online can be isolating and lonely, resulting in lower levels of motivation (Jagers & Zu, 2016). Interacting is generally easier in face to face environments, and teachers may find it easier to judge levels of student-content engagement in such settings as well; however, quality courses will encourage and facilitate these interactions to boost engagement and combat feelings of isolation.

Historically, the concept of learner outcomes has been tied to the quantitative; a passing numerical grade indicates positive learner outcomes, and failing grades linked to negative outcomes. When looking at several different components of a course, such as design and learning objectives, one study found that only levels of interpersonal interactions were predictors for grade outcomes (Jagers & Zu, 2016). While these types of assessments -- the measuring of content learned -- are still quite important, they are not the only types of outcomes that are important. Student satisfaction with a course may very well correlate with grades, but that doesn't have to be the case. In the face of ever increasing student debt-loads, overall satisfaction with a course can weigh heavily in a student's decision to continue taking courses at a particular institution.

### **Goals**

From the 5-star rubric:

- Students are encouraged to introduce themselves to the class

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- Course activities and assignments promote student-instructor interaction and student-content interaction. Student-to-student interaction is fostered when appropriate to the academic discipline.
- The instructor clearly states how often students are required to interact with one another and the
- instructor, the expected quality of such interactions, and how these interactions affect student grades

From the CTL Course Review:

*Principle 1: Good practice encourages contact between students and faculty.*

(student-instructor)

Examples of evidence to look for:

- A "welcome message" is provided at the beginning of the course that encourages student-to-instructor contact for course-related discussions or concerns.
- The instructor encourages and fosters a healthy exchange of ideas and sharing of experiences among course participants.
- The instructor initiates contact with, or respond to, students on a regular basis in order to establish a consistent online presence in the course (and prior notice is given to students in the event that the instructor will be unavailable for more than a few days, such as might be the case during professional travel).
- A prominent announcement area is used to communicate important up-to-date course information to students, such as reminders of impending assignment due dates,

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curriculum changes, scheduled absences, etc.

- The instructor holds regular office hours, and by appointment, that are mediated by technology (e.g., the telephone, chat areas, Adobe Connect Pro) to accommodate distance students.
- Student inquiries are responded in a timely manner.
- The instructor provides students with interaction space for study groups, "hallway conversations," etc.

*Principle 2: Good practice develops reciprocity and cooperation among students.*

(student - student)

Examples of evidence to look for:

- Regular opportunities for students to engage in one or more of the following activities:
- Formal and/or informal discussions of course topics
- Collaborative course assignments
- Study groups
- A "meet one another" activity at the beginning of the course so students can begin to make personal connections.
- Encouragement to students to strengthen their online presence in the course by sharing links to their e-portfolio, personal Website, and/or posting a photo of themselves to the class Web space (e.g., their ANGEL profile).
- Group assignments that follow the basic tenets of cooperative learning (see Resources, below) in order to avoid the common pitfalls of "group work."

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- An explanation of the criteria for “good” discussion participation.
- Modeling of good discussion participation practices by the instructor.
- Discussion prompts that help to guide and elicit student participation in class discussion activities.
- Instructor *facilitation* of class discussions by encouraging, probing, questioning, summarizing, etc.
- Student interaction space(s) for study groups, "hallway conversations," etc.

*Principle 3: Good practice encourages active learning.*

(student - content)

Examples of evidence to look for:

- Student activities that involve one or more of the following:
- Active use of writing, speaking, and other forms of self-expression
- Opportunity for information gathering, synthesis, and analysis in solving problems (including the use of library, electronic/computer and other resources, and quantitative reasoning and interpretation, as applicable)
- Engagement in collaborative learning activities
- Application of intercultural and international competence
- Dialogue pertaining to social behavior, community, and scholarly conduct
- For General Education courses, three or more of these activities are integrated into courses offered in the knowledge domains.
- Opportunities for students to “customize” their learning by tailoring assignments to their

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personal and professional interests and needs.

- Examples of student work where they:
  - Think, talk, or write about their learning
  - Reflect, relate, organize, apply, synthesize, or evaluate information
  - Perform research, lab or studio work, or physical activities
  - Participate in, design, or develop educational games and simulations.

### **Data**

A wide variety of data will be collected for analysis and span the gamut between short term pocket data analytics and multi-year trends in enrollment and graduation rates. Latchem (2014) offers a very different view for measurements of quality and suggests that instead of focusing on inputs (which is what rubrics like 5 star and Quality Matters look at), the focus should be on the outputs, the outcomes, and the impacts, i.e. the immediate, short term, and long term individual and societal effects and consequences of the online learning (p. 330).

**Qualitative Data.** Comments on student formative assessments and summative course evaluations, comments on 5-star rubric and CTL course review, follow-up surveys with alumni

**Quantitative Data.** Points earned in the 5-star rubric standards listed above. A sampling of data analytics available via the LMS, such as time on task, content hits, and number of discussion postings. Any quantitative data, such as likert scales, used on evaluations. Percentage of students who pass specific courses, who continue to enroll in more courses, who pass the IT GACE, and who finish the program and earn their degree.

### **Data Analysis**

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Analysis of this data will look at both the micro and macro levels of student engagement and outcomes, and will include crossovers into data collected for course quality and faculty engagement.

On the micro, or short-term, level, microanalytics of data acquired via the LMS can offer snapshots of student engagement, such as time spent with specific pieces of content, content hits, number of discussion posts, etc. (Vivolo 2020). If faculty are given specific training on how to access that data, instructors may be able to pull and analyze the data themselves, but to encourage more consistent and timely data pulls, specified members of supports staffs could be responsible for the actual data mining while faculty members, along with staff from the Center for Teaching and Learning, interpret the results. Results from the data analytics can be correlated with student and faculty surveys post-course completion, but can also be used to make course corrections mid-course.

On the macrolevel, information on overall student engagement and outcomes can be viewed in the long term. Positive student outcomes would include pass rates of courses, percentage of students who earn their degree, percentage of students who remain in the field 5 years post degree, etc. While it would be difficult to link these outcomes to any one course, they can give some ideas of the overall quality of the program.

### **Faculty Engagement**

Much research has been done to determine the most effective ways for faculty to develop a “presence” in online classes and increase engagement. Some suggestions include a video introduction, quick turn around on email responses, and using students’ names. When looking at

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a variety of factors tied to faculty's satisfaction with online learning, interactions with students was key (Shea et al., 2005). Not only is faculty engagement significant for faculty, it's essential for learner's perspectives on quality. Based on the responses from online learners, Ehler (2004) found that tutor support (aka instructor support) was most important for learner satisfaction and impression of quality.

### **Goals:**

Along with the 5 star rubric and CTL course review, UWG has created a list of recommended teaching behaviors as part of the quality assurance in online courses (2015). These faculty expectations are:

- Respond to student emails and inquiries within \_\_\_\_\_ hours (24-48 are typical).
- Return grades within 5 days of assignment, with substantive feedback where applicable.
- Call students by name on discussion boards.
- Provide instructor introduction at beginning of course, and welcome each student individually.
- Instructor has a regular presence within course or on discussion board, defined as \_\_\_\_\_ or more discussion board postings, webinars, or class announcements each week.
- Instructor demonstrates respect for students
- Instructor offers and is available for student assistance

### **Data**

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The input data for this area will be the 5-star rubric (is the structure there to facilitate engagement) and the output will be student surveys and faculty surveys (were the structures and efforts effective).

**Qualitative Data.** Comments on student formative assessments and summative course evaluations, comments on 5-star rubric and CTL course review, and faculty surveys

**Quantitative Data.** Any quantitative data, such as likert scales, used on evaluations. Quantity of instructor time spent in the course, number of announcements made, comments posted, etc. Completion rates of the recommended training for new staff and yearly 2 hour refresher courses for all staff.

### **Data Analysis**

After the data is collected, department heads and faculty, with the help of the Center for Teaching and Learning, will look at the results and look for patterns that indicate specific faculty actions that seem to increase student interaction and overall satisfaction. Once these faculty actions have been determined, Jackson et al (2010) suggest the development of specific professional development that “emphasizes the benefits of concrete faculty actions in the online environment” which will “generate an awareness of effective faculty actions but also encourage the development and utilization of original faculty actions in each online classroom” (p. 92).

### **Connection to eLearning Leadership**

The plan thus laid out is the start of a comprehensive evaluation of the quality of the program, but it is incomplete due to the limitations of the tools used to measure it. Again, per the quality assurance in online courses (2015), the four areas of focus for course standards are course

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information, course design and organization, communication and collaboration, and assessments and evaluations. In theory, course content and learning activities might fall under course design and organization, but the description for that focus standard includes nothing about learning objectives or activities, only recommending a variety of course materials.

The 5 star rubric includes more information than the quality assurance, but, once again, there is a surprising lack of emphasis on the content and the learning. Looking at point weight, an instructor having a photo, bio, and self introduction (three points) is worth “more” in terms of quality than having course content and materials of sufficient breadth and depth (two points). Having learning objectives (two points) is equally important as having working links (two points). While it may be a nitpicky focus on word-usage, one of the very few mentions of learning activities is found in the instructional design section about how to chunk materials/modules, so that most include activities involving recall or application, two of the lower levels skills according to Bloom’s Taxonomy.

This is not to imply that courses are of poor academic quality, but it begs the question: are these evaluation tools meant for face-to-face courses that are moving online, or are they for wholly new, online-only courses? For brand new classes which have not already had their content and alignment vetted through other means, the adoption of a rubric like Quality Matters or Quality Course Teaching and Instructional Practice would be beneficial due to their additional emphasis on content, objectives, and learning activities.

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