

NMSU Works To Elevate Online Courses

With more and more college courses transitioning into online formats, New Mexico State University is working to ensure the quality of its online classes matches the quality of those delivered inside the classroom.



To reach this goal, NMSU's Online Course Improvement Program (OCIP) began in 2009 as a partnership between the Associated Students of New Mexico State University/Student Technology Advisory Committee and the College of Extended Learning.

As an expansion on services currently available through NMSU's Teaching Academy, the OCIP assists faculty who are transitioning from face-to-face instruction to a blended (combined online and in-person learning) or fully online delivery format, with the overall goal of supporting improvement in the quality of blended and online courses.

“We often have a saying around here: Good teaching is good teaching — it doesn't really matter what the delivery format is,” said OCIP Director Susan Bussmann. “You have to engage students with content. You have to engage students with each other, and you have to engage students yourself, as the instructor. Those are the three main constructs in course design.”

OCIP abides by a set of standards established by Quality Matters, a nationally recognized leader in quality assurance for online education. With Quality Matters as a framework, the OCIP functions through five main goals: assist faculty in enhanced Web course design and delivery while reducing student textbook costs; provide

faculty instructional design services; facilitate participation in national digital content consortiums; create and support a culture of quality for online courses taught at NMSU; and develop a customized professional development model.

While the Online Course Improvement Program has directly benefited more than 100 NMSU faculty members over the last five years through in-depth professional development programs such as One Year Plus Fellowship, New2Online and faculty summer camps, the reach of the OCIP extends beyond the NMSU campus. Through free webinars and the OCIP Resource Center website, an expanded audience of around 600 main-campus faculty, staff, community college faculty and adjunct faculty have received the same valuable information.

Through these efforts, it has been demonstrated that the OCIP has helped faculty reduce course material and expenses for students. Additionally, according to Bussmann, improved course design — in-person, blended or online — creates a more easily navigable and transparent course, which can lessen the learner's load.

“If you're having to deal with all the minutia, it gets in the way of your learning because your frustration is not conducive for you making an effort to learn,” Bussmann said.

There has also been anecdotal evidence that blending courses increases participatory, active learning. With course improvements, instructors have reported receiving fewer inquiries, higher average exam scores, higher retention rates of students in courses, higher student satisfaction, higher student engagement, and better student products and course evaluations.

“We collect evaluation data in a formal way, from our faculty participants. We do surveys, we do focus groups at the midpoint ... we also do an exit survey,” said Bussmann. “How you teach online, and how you support your online learners can be very different in how you engage and interact, and it should be different because

the technology and the whole process is different versus face-to-face.”

According to Bussmann, one item faculty tend to need more work with is writing measurable learning objectives and clarifying the knowledge, skills and attitudes that they want retained from their course.

“If you’re asking me to play a game, I want to know the goals of the game, and I want to know how to win the game — that’s basically what learning objectives tell the student,” Bussmann said. “Most students ask, ‘How do I get an A in this course?’ So learning objectives, when you think about the metaphor of a game — here are the rules, here’s what the expected learning outcomes are, and that’s how you get your ‘A.’ That’s how you win the game.”

As the Online Course Improvement Program matures, Bussmann said their goal is to achieve the maximum extent of professional development possible by partnering a group from the OCIP with a faculty team to create Quality Matters Recognized courses from the start, rather than altering them after they are developed.

For more information on NMSU’s Online Course Improvement Program, visit ocip.nmsu.edu. For more information on the OCIP Resource Center, visit <http://bit.ly/pQMozO>.

Information from NMSU