California State University Northridge (CSUN)

Basic Principles of Online Course Design

1. **Knowledge of Student Profile Guides Instructional Design Decisions**

   Tseng College online undergraduate, graduate, and certificate programs are designed for adult working-professionals. This population of student works full-time, has personal and professional obligations, and may not be able to devote a fixed amount of time every week to attend classes or commit to being full-time students. Due to such constraints, this demographic chooses online programs for its flexibility and customizability. Therefore, courses, designed and created by our CSUN faculty and instructional design team, allow students the much-needed flexibility to successfully meet their educational goals through the use of both asynchronous and synchronous instructional approaches.

   To support our unique learners in achieving their goals, our student experience is grounded in a cohort model in which all students begin the program at the same time, progress through the courses together and graduate as a group. This format creates a strong learning community that helps participants complete the program on time and also provides a comprehensive learning experience. Each successive course builds on those that preceded it and lays the groundwork for those that follow.

   At the start of the course design process, CSUN faculty and the instructional design team ensure that course design decisions are in line with the curriculum design decisions at the program level. The integrated curriculum design approach is adopted to ensure that students' learning experiences build on the learning gains from previous courses. In addition, in order to further ensure integration, instructors teaching courses that are being offered simultaneously or consecutively collaborate with each other in sharing course design decisions and instructional strategies.

2. **Alignment of Learning Objectives and Assignments**

   We achieve educational effectiveness in student achievement by designing programs that are focused on learning goals and the pedagogy of achieving those goals. Framing the design of the online course around the learning objectives allows the course to be highly effective in meeting learning goals. CSUN faculty and the instructional design team work hand-in-hand to ensure that assignments in each course are aligned with the course learning objectives in order to effectively demonstrate students' learning gain.

   In addition, articulating and thinking in detail about how the learning objectives are going to be assessed (whether through formative or summative assessments), CSUN faculty are able to create custom content in order to help meet these learning objectives. The process of designing assessments also provides the instructor with the opportunity to craft assessment rubrics, which in turn leads to greater learning gains as students develop a concrete understanding of the instructors' expectations.

3. Robust Opportunities for Interaction & Engagement

When designing online courses, faculty create robust opportunities, within their courses, for students to interact with the instructor as well as among themselves. The negative correlation between amount of student interaction with instructor and peers and student dropout rates has been conclusively established through many years of research. In addition, research has also established that increased interaction is positively correlated with a greater sense of learning gains by students.

Therefore, in an effort to create a learning environment that is involved, engaged, and effective for our student population, faculty and instructional designers work hand-in-hand to leverage a diverse array of instructional strategies (listed below) that increase interaction and engagement in CSUN online courses.

- **Active Learning**: A learning process by which students engage in activities that promote analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and collaboration. Problem-based learning, collaborative learning, case studies and simulations are examples of some of the active learning instructional approaches that are used to increase interaction and engagement.

- **Reflection**: Courses are designed to give students the opportunity to reflect and comment on the progress of their educational attainments. This provides the students with the opportunity to take ownership of their own learning path, which consequently leads the students to be motivated and engaged in their educational journey at CSUN.

- **Building an Engaged Learning Community:** Various strategies are leveraged during the design process in an effort to aid building an engaged learning community. Offering timely and relevant feedback, one of many approaches in increasing engagement among learners, not only aids in the process of learning, but it also helps build a learning community which leads to greater interaction and engagement. During the design of the online courses, instructors and Instructional designers work together to identify the type of feedback and the time frame within which the feedback will be provided to the students. This expectation is then articulated to the students. Another approach that helps create and nurture learning communities is that of actively identifying instructional strategies that would build channels of communication between students and instructors and between students and their peers. This continued and constructive communication creates a strong learning community that helps student complete the program on time and also provides a comprehensive learning experience. Strategies that help instill a culture of open and constructive communication are leveraged during the design of the online courses.

4. **Equal Access Through Innovative Solutions**

Universal Access to Learning: In the design of online programs, faculty, instructional designers, and instructional technologists work together to ensure that all instructional materials are easily accessible by all, irrespective of physical disabilities and/or learning styles. Several rounds of quality testing and evaluations are conducted to ensure that the manner in which students have access to equivalent learning opportunities.

Multi-Modal Approach to Content Delivery: To effectively address the needs of a diverse student body with diverse learning styles, adopting a multi-modal approach to content delivery allows one to ensure that all students are able to effectively engage with the learning materials for maximum learning gains. When brainstorming ideas for content delivery and design of content, faculty work with the assigned Instructional design teams in an effort to identify and explore varied approaches and technologies to content delivery that are not only effective, but also efficient and engaging.

Exploration of Resources and Technology Possibilities: Faculty, in collaboration with the instructional design team, explore effective solutions to assess learning, deliver course content, increase student interaction and engagement, as well as archive and host instructional artifacts created during the process of course design and production. In addition, Distance Learning Instructional Design teams are on a constant quest to ensure effective, innovative, and state-of-the-art tools for instruction, assessment, recording-keeping, and communication are in place for the instructional community to access and leverage for greater learning gains.

5. **Evaluation**

Lastly, but most importantly, an integral part of the online course design process is evaluation. Each online course is evaluated by students twice. The first evaluation takes place at the mid-course level, where the students have the opportunity to reflect on their educational experience up until that point. The second evaluation is administered at the end of the course, where the students provide faculty, as well as instructional designers, feedback regarding the effectiveness of the course. Data collected from both of these surveys inform updates to the course content as well as instructional design decisions for its future offerings. Additionally, the College has also developed a series of dashboards that show student feedback to the instructor and the program academic lead, so that decisions about program improvement can be made based on feedback provided by the students.