# Chapter 1

# Creating Standards for Online Courses

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We have all heard the reports about how much online learning is growing year to year. For instance, Sloan-C reports that online learning grew 21% in 2009 alone while higher education in general only grew 2% during the same time period (Allen & Seaman, 2010). However, despite growth like this, faculty remain skeptical of online learning. In the fall of 2008, questions were beginning to be raised in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Colorado Denver about the quality of the online courses taught in the college. As a result of these questions and the overall skepticism about online learning, I was asked by the Department of Communication to review the literature on online education and research best practices in online pedagogy.

The report that resulted from my research addresses several myths about online education, such as "online education is not as effective as face-to-face instruction" and "online education cannot effectively teach communication courses." Citing studies by Bernard, et. al (2004), Brooks (2009), Meyer (2002, 2004), Phipps & Merisotis (1999), among others, I illustrate in this report that the literature on online learning suggests that online learning is as good as if not better than face-to-face education. The report culminates in the identification of some *minimum* standards of quality that all online courses in the Department of Communication should meet. [A copy of the report can be downloaded at online]

In the following paragraphs, I outline these minimum standards in hopes of encouraging other faculty, departments, schools and/or colleges to adopt a similar set of standards.

## A Minimum Set of Standards

Faculty at the University of Colorado Denver, like faculty elsewhere, value diversity. They tend to resist the evils often associated with standardization, while at the same time valuing good teaching! While my colleagues and I in the Department of Communication do not want "clones" of our online courses and value greatly the nuances that faculty bring to each course they teach, we believe there should be certain *minimum* standards that each online course should meet in order ensure quality pedagogy and consistent design.

Therefore, in the Fall of 2009, the Department of Communication created a new position called the "Online Pedagogy Coordinator." I have had the privilege serving in this role since its inception. As the Online Pedagogy Coordinator, I am responsible for reviewing all online courses in our department to ensure that they meet the minimum standards established by the department. Since the Spring of 2010, I have been ensuring that every online course offered by the Department of Communication meets the following *minimum* standards:

**Department of Communication *Minimum* Standards for Online Courses***

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| **Syllabus** |
| ☐ List overall course outcomes |
| ☐ Explain your specific grading policies |
| |
| **Course Materials** |
| ☐ All readings and assignments should be contained within the course management system (CMS); students shouldn't be directed to the leave the CMS for course readings. Direct e-links to outside articles should be provided. |
| ☐ Include a section under the Course Home to provide tips for succeeding in your online course. |
| |
| **Weeks / Units** |
| ☐ List the learning objectives for each week/unit |
| ☐ Provide references at the end of each week / unit |
| |
| **Threaded Discussions** |
| ☐ Include regular threaded discussions throughout the semester |
| ☐ Establish instructor's presence in the discussions in a "woven" manner |
| |
| **Grading** |
| ☐ Include grading rubrics for all assignments and discussions |
| |
| **Submission of Assignments** |
| ☐ All assignments should be turned in using the Dropbox. Assignments should not be submitted by email. |
| |
| **Office Hours** |
| ☐ Conduct virtual office hours to answer general course questions |
| |
| **Welcoming Environment** |
| ☐ Include a welcome page on the homepage of the LMS |
| |
| **Design** |
| ☐ Incorporate graphics to make pages more visually appealing |
| ☐ Ensure that all course materials have a professional and consistent appearance (e.g., color choice, font, background colors) |
| ☐ Use textboxes to provide strong contrast for all units and announcements |

***A printable version of these standards can be accessed online.

**Implications and Concluding Thoughts**

The instructors in the Department of Communication have embraced these standards.  In fact, since implementing these standards, my colleagues and I have had several meetings to share information and ideas in order to ensure the quality of our online courses.   The list of minimum standards has become a "jumping off" place for us to use as we discuss and improve our courses.  For example, we have shared ideas

about the use of video to supplement course information, how to conduct peer reviews of student work, and how to set up and manage group projects.

The word is getting around and other departments in the College of Liberal Arts and Science are asking about these standards. While these standards may seem to be a very elementary and an overall minimal list, students have reported that they have taken many online courses that did not even meet these very minimum standards. Therefore, we recommend for other departments, schools, and colleges to construct their own list of minimum standards to ensure that all students taking online courses receive a consistent experience. Currently the University of Colorado Denver's Faculty Ethics Committee is investigating how to ensure that all online classes meet minimum standards. One of the possibilities the committee is considering is the creation of more "Online Pedagogy Coordinator" positions—either in each department, or in each school. Another possibility the committee is considering is requiring that all online instructors receive certification in online pedagogy and design before teaching online for the University. With the University at large initiating an investigation into how to ensure quality and consistency across all online courses, it is time for us to construct at least a list of minimum standards within each department and provide a means to ensure that these minimum standards are met.

## References

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## Bio

Kathy Pounders earned her Master of Arts in Communication at the University of Colorado Denver. She is currently working on a second Master of Arts in Informational Technology Pedagogy and Design through the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Colorado Denver. In the Fall of 2009 she was appointed to the position of Online Pedagogy Coordinator in the Department of Communication at the University of Colorado Denver. Kathy is a member of the University of Colorado Denver Online Faculty Advisory Committee. Prior to joining the world of academia in 1993, Kathy worked as Training and Development Manager in the business world.