The debate has been ongoing since the inception of online learning: is the quality of student learning in distance education courses equal to that of face-to-face courses? While studies have shown that online learning can be as good as or even better than traditional classroom learning, many academic administrators and professors continue to be skeptical of this delivery method. How does the University of Central Oklahoma ensure high quality learning, regardless of delivery method?

In 2009, the US Department of Education released a meta-analysis of evidence-based best practices in online learning. This report looked at four questions:

1) how effective is online learning as compared to traditional classroom learning;
2) is classroom learning enhanced through the use of online supplemental materials; 3) which online teaching practices are most effective; and, 4) are there conditions that influence effective online learning? (Means, et al, 2009, pp. xi).

Findings from this study show that, on average, students in online classes performed moderately better in learning material than did students in traditional courses. The study also shows that students engaged in a blended learning approach, with some face-to-face learning and some online learning, performed better in learning material than students in either completely online or traditional courses (Means, et al., 2009, pp. xiv-xv).
Student demand for online learning continues to grow at about 10% per year, and distance learning is identified by many colleges as a critical success factor for sustained growth. Despite the US DOE study and student interest, some academic administrators are still not convinced that online learning is sufficiently rigorous or of high quality as compared to traditional courses (The Babson Group, 2011).

At the University of Central Oklahoma, online learning is scrutinized even more closely than that of traditional classroom courses. Besides going through department, college and university curriculum reviews and approval, Academic Affairs requires that online courses be evaluated by a faculty committee to ensure the student experience is excellent (Office of Academic Affairs, 2012). Based upon the UCO online course quality evaluation rubric that was created by a committee of UCO faculty and academic administrators, faculty evaluators look for ease of navigation, the quantity and variety of assignments and activities, opportunities for student self-assessment, student-to-student engagement and collaborations, student-to-faculty communications and connections, and overall usability of the courses. Only those courses that score 90% or higher on the evaluation are permitted to be offered through online delivery.

In addition to requiring this extra review of online courses, the Online Course Policy also requires UCO faculty members to complete an online course facilitation program (Office of Academic Affairs, 2012). This online workshop provides faculty members the opportunity to experience online learning from a student's perspective, and provides and models best practices in online teaching to help ensure a successful
educational experience for both the students and the professors engaged in online learning.

The distance education team of CPDE offers training and support for faculty members engaged in eLearning at UCO. In addition to the course facilitation certification, the distance education team offers course design workshops for both beginner and expert eLearning faculty. Mini-workshops (usually one hour in length) are offered throughout the year, and focus on best practices in eLearning design and delivery. All services, programs and workshops offered through the distance education department are free to all UCO full- and part-time faculty members.

For more information on eLearning at UCO, visit our website at http://www.uco.edu/cpde/ or call us at 405.974.2420, or stop in for a cup of coffee and a chat. The distance education team is located in the CPDE office, NUC 341. We look forward to meeting you soon!

Where do you stand on online learning? Visit the CPDE blog at http://id-cpde.blogspot.com/ and share your opinion.

Bibliography

