

California State University, Northridge (CSUN)

Basic Principles of CSUN's Approach to Crafting Online Degree and Certificate Programs

CSUN created a distance learning (DL) unit that resides in the university's Tseng College: Graduate, International and Midcareer Education (the Tseng College) for the development and support of fully online degree and certificate programs. DL has a team of instructional designers who work collaboratively with CSUN faculty for the initial crafting of fully online degree/certificate programs, the ongoing refinement and revision of those programs, and the support of faculty and students in those programs. This applies whether the fully online degree/certificate program is funded from the CSUN General Fund (state funded) or through CSUN self-support funding.

For self-support hybrid degree and certificate programs, the DL unit is also responsible for working collaboratively with faculty and other instructors assigned to a self-support hybrid program for the initial crafting, ongoing refinement and revision, and continual support of faculty and students.

CSUN does not consider excellence in online teaching and learning as primarily an issue of technology, although thoughtful and effective use of technology is an important component of each online program. Rather, excellence in fully online and hybrid degree and certificate programs is based on the same issues and principles that make face-to-face programs distinctive – the excellence of faculty and the care taken in crafting and continuously improving the curriculum and instructional strategies, in light of insights gained through assessment, changes in fields/disciplines, possibilities presented by national and international forefront programs, and developments in professional practice.

Because of the care and significant investment of time and resources in the development of fully online and hybrid self-support programs, they provide educational experiences that lead to exceptionally high levels of student achievement (as measured by on-time graduation rates and student success in gaining national licensure to practice in fields for which licensure is a requirement). This comprehensive approach fosters student engagement (with faculty, other students in the program's learning community and the curriculum/content of the program); a commitment to ongoing learning; and a breadth and depth of understanding that enriches students' professional, community and personal lives. CSUN faculty are committed to excellence and innovation in instructional strategies; enhancing the educational relationship between students and faculty; faculty and university support of student success; and extensive support of faculty efforts provided through the Tseng College in collaboration with other academic colleges, departments and administrative units.

CSUN's online degree and credit certificate programs are subject to the same CSU and CSUN academic standards, policies and processes (including academic approvals and program review/assessment) as are applicable to any face-to-face program. Departmental and faculty responsibility for the curriculum is the same for face-to-face and fully online or hybrid degree and credit certificate programs. Fully online and hybrid online degree and credit certificate programs are subject to all Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) accreditation standards, and the standards of special accreditors. Students in fully online and hybrid degree and credit certificate programs are subject to the same CSU and CSUN policies governing academic honesty, conduct, grades and grade appeals as students in face-to-face programs.

Academic decisions about whether a single-discipline degree or credit certificate program should

be offered online are made by the academic department and its faculty for single-discipline programs. The decision to go forward is made in consultation with the dean of the academic college in which the department resides. Academic decisions about whether multidisciplinary degree or credit certificate programs should be offered online or hybrid are made by the academic college(s) in which the courses reside and, in turn, with each department contributing a course(s) and/or modules to that multidisciplinary program.

DL has staff prepared in instructional design and related fields (human factors, educational technology, curriculum and instruction) at the master's or doctoral levels. DL also has a staff of university educated technical specialists prepared in computer science or a related technical field. All these staff members have experience working with faculty in the development and support phases of online degree and certificate programs.

CSUN's fully online program and self-support hybrid programs are offered in the cohort format, using CSUN's distinctive approach to the initial development of programs (<https://www.csun.edu/exlinfo/policies/Basic-Principles-Program-Development-for-CSUN-Self-Support-Degree-and-Credit-Certificate-Programs.pdf>) in the cohort format one course builds upon another, with a focus on making the program an excellent and distinctive educational experience that helps students achieve significant learning outcomes at both the course and program levels.

CSUN does not assume that the best approach for fully online and hybrid degree and certificate programs is to transfer the structure and strategy of a face-to-face course to an online setting. Rather, CSUN assumes that crafting a strong online course and, in turn, a successful online program requires a reconsideration of each course in light of the distinctive teaching and learning capacities offered by the cohort format and the online learning environment. In turn, CSUN supports each faculty member (with time, compensation and collaborative support) by exploring the online options and possibilities that are right for the program, course and instructional style/preferences.

DL's instructional design team members work individually with each faculty member. The goal is to prepare the faculty member to teach online in the most effective manner possible, and to help each faculty member craft an individualized online course in terms of achieving student learning outcomes, presenting appropriate materials for the course, engaging students to achieve the best educational dynamics for a course, and designing assignments and instructional strategies using the most appropriate technical tools (<https://www.csun.edu/exlinfo/policies/Basic-Principles-Online-Course-Design.pdf>).

CSUN approaches the relationship between each faculty member and their courses for fully online and hybrid degree and certificate programs in the same way as for face-to-face programs. If a new faculty member is assigned to teach a course in an online degree or credit certificate program, that newly assigned faculty member will be supported by a DL instructional designer in the crafting of the course so that it reflects that faculty member's knowledge and experience as well as their own approach to teaching. CSUN does not create "template" online courses that instructors are expected to teach. Rather CSUN ensures that all fully online and hybrid degree and certificate programs provide those enrolled with a true CSUN educational experience rooted in the educational relationships between each faculty member and students in the specific course and program.

DL also provides a two-week orientation and training program for students who enroll in online degree or certificate programs. This prepares students for success in the online educational environment and in the specific online program. Further, DL and student support program managers/coordinators in the Tseng College provide comprehensive and ongoing student support

from the start to the completion of each cohort.

CSUN has been offering fully online degree programs for over 18 years. The DL instructional design and technical teams work with each faculty member to craft and support a course that is educationally robust in terms of achieving high levels of student success, with several programs achieving on-time graduation rates of above 80%.