

Explanation of the OIES
(Online Instructor Evaluator System)
At Park University

August 2008

Statement of Need / Significance / Relevance

This document describes a systematic quality management process developed and implemented by Park University to help ensure that students seeking a high-caliber learning experience receive the benefits of specially trained, mentored and evaluated faculty, many of whom teach part time and are relatively inexperienced at online teaching/learning.

Park has experienced a surge in distance education enrollments. Starting from a 1996 pilot involving 20 students, we presently employ some 225 instructors each term in order to accommodate over 21,000 online students annually, distributed as follows:

- 7 baccalaureate degree completion programs
- 4 master's degree programs
- 45,000 annual enrollments, involving 42 campus centers
- 8,000 enrollments per term
- 400 course sections per term

Such dramatic and rapid growth has presented numerous opportunities and challenges, particularly because Park online courses are offered throughout the year in five accelerated terms of eight weeks' duration. The shift in course delivery mode has required new approaches to monitoring and evaluating academic quality. The priority focus of the College for Distance Learning at Park is fulfilling the University Mission relative to academic excellence, critical thinking, effective communication skills and lifelong learning. Park is committed to high standards, academic integrity, course content consistency, and effective measures of learning outcomes.

Park has chosen to promote student development and academic rigor by funneling substantial resources into faculty training, mentoring, and evaluation, along with the standard student support and services. Typically, instructor training is sparse and faculty evaluation occurs only through end-of-course student evaluations that may or may not yield adequate information on how the instructor performs in the online environment. Consequently, the **Online Instructor Evaluation System (OIES)** was developed by the College for Distance Learning to enable and ensure the finest quality education experience for online students via a systematic approach to faculty training, support, mentoring, and evaluation.

Upon successful completion of a 6-week online training seminar that encompass the platform, institutional policies, and research-based best practices, the new instructor is assigned an online

faculty mentor and a course to teach the following term. For the second term of online teaching, the instructor is assigned to a doctorally prepared faculty/Online Instructor Evaluator, who conducts a series of pre-term, in-term, and post-term evaluations designed to highlight and strengthen course facilitation skills and to make adjustments if warranted. The instructor meanwhile performs a series of reflective self-reviews, also online, and engages in ongoing email and telephonic dialogue with the Online Instructor Evaluator as needed. Thus the OIES enables the College for Distance Learning to gauge the faculty development strengths and needs of instructors.

The OIES reviews incorporate checklists and reminders to help instructors stay on track, not only with the pragmatics of teaching online and Park policy compliance, but also to foster collegial dialogue on andragogy. Using the OIES reviews as a template, Online Instructor Evaluators observe the online course on a regular basis to provide timely feedback during the term. Best practices, University-specific policies, and course facilitation requirements are discussed. The emphasis at all times focuses on the instructor's course facilitation skills, and not subject matter mastery or the content or structure of the course. Curricular content is the responsibility of the academic department. Rather, the OIES is meant to enhance high-quality instruction and online teaching excellence.

Summative evaluation occurs upon completion of the term; this last review is forwarded to the academic unit along with the instructor self-review and student evaluations. Following an instructor's initial term of online teaching, the OIES mentoring and evaluation occur annually.

The evaluation process emphasizes the instructor as a reflective and involved participant in quality management, and addresses these focal areas:

- Formative Instructor Appraisals
 - Preterm Review
 - Compliance with Park University/College for Distance Learning Policies
 - Preparation for Course Start Date
 - Formative Review 1
 - Community Building
 - Discussion Thread Interaction
 - Course Organization
 - Supplemental Materials
 - Formative Review 2
 - Discussion Facilitation
 - Course Climate
 - Discussion Grading
 - Formative Review 3
 - Implementation of Assessments
 - Feedback and Grading
 - Course Organization
 - Final Exam Preparation
- Summative Instructor Appraisal
 - Course Organization

- Building Community
- Discussion Facilitation
- Assessment, Grading and Feedback
- Course Climate
- Professional Engagement
- Faculty Reflective Self-Appraisal
 - Recognition of strengths and weaknesses as an instructor

Academic departments use these artifacts from the College for Distance Learning as a basis for retention and promotion decisions. The evaluation system offers a practical academic portfolio artifact to showcase teaching strengths and course facilitation talents of online instructors. Additionally, the formative and summative tools foster instructor reflection on best online teaching practices. Finally, OIES data can be linked to institutional assessment to meet regional accreditation requirements.

Colleges and universities that offer programs at a distance are challenged to maintain academic quality and consistency in instruction. Park University has initiated an evidence-based system to ensure that our instructors are qualified, trained, and mentored, and has established criteria and standards for evaluation. The Online Instructor Evaluation System derives from current literature in adult education, best practices in distance education, and a conscientious peer review following a pilot implementation.

Demonstrated Impact on Problem Resolution

The Online Instructor Evaluation System was developed out of concern for the academic success of our students. The system emphasizes the instructor as a reflective and involved participant in the evaluation process. Its benefit and impact have been demonstrated repeatedly through:

- Improved instructor performance
- Enhanced student satisfaction
- Strengthened scholarship of teaching
- Clarification of learning needs of faculty
- More robust preparation for accreditation visit
- Informed personnel decisions

The Online Instructor Evaluation System is intended to encourage professional development of all Park online instructors. At the end of the OIES pilot project, faculty reviewees provided much needed feedback on the system, and helped to redesign the overall process to ensure that the OIES was instructor “friendly” as it affirmed institutional goals. Overall, instructors new to Park have been pleased with the process, as demonstrated by the following quotes:

Quotes from new instructors:

- “I love the constructive criticism and since this is my first time teaching online courses, it is greatly appreciated.”
- “I really appreciate your mentorship and suggestions this semester, as this has facilitated me to become a better instructor for future Park classes. Again, thank you for your time and guidance over the past 8 weeks!”
- “This being my first course online [for Park University] has been a great experience, learning as I go as well as generating ideas for me on how to make changes in the course materials, supplements, etc.”

Quotes from experienced instructors:

- “Thank you, it has been a pleasure having you ‘look over my shoulder’; I promise to do better in the future.”
- “I have enjoyed this faculty evaluation. You have given me a lot to think about, and some great ideas on how I might approach my teaching style and my classroom.”

Creative/Innovative Use of Technology, Personnel, Resources

Web-based Portal. The OIES process is a paperless system, conducted online with forms and procedures accessed through a portal specifically created by Park web applications developers. Formative and summative reviews are archived in a server database for use and retrieval by instructor evaluators, instructors, and departmental administrators (who have access only to the summative reviews, not the formatives). The portal affords both security and ease of accessibility. Online forms are cost effective and save in printing costs, inter-office transfer of information, and storage space. The portal is accessible by instructors and evaluators around the clock, daily. Course documents are archived for future reference. The portal, which is confidential and secured and therefore unavailable to the public, is located at the College for Distance Learning Logon, https://www.park.edu/cdl/logon_CD.L.aspx.

Encouragement of Course Enhancements. Instructors are encouraged to add supplemental content to enrich the core content of the course(s) they teach. In fact, several items in the formative reviews invite instructors to include additional information that is timely or relevant to the students in that particular section during the term.

Timely, Ongoing Feedback. The OIES provides ongoing, timely feedback to the instructor during the term – a crucial factor for accelerated courses. Previous evaluation methods often posted summative judgments upon completion of the course, when the suggestions for improvement were not as relevant or could only be implemented in future terms. The OIES allows for immediate adjustments by the instructor during the active, current term.

Evidence-based Practices. The OIES provides a rich packet of evaluation information that is grounded in educational research. Administrators who are unfamiliar with the online teaching environment, or do not teach online, likely are unfamiliar with the essentials of first-rate online teaching. Armed with better information, administrators can place greater confidence in their

retention and promotion decisions as these relate to online instructors and the benefits to students.

Modern Application of Traditional Evaluations. The OIES represents a transfer of the traditional peer/administrator evaluation visit in an instructor's on-ground classroom to the online environment. As online learning features a mix of old and new teaching techniques, so too is the OIES a blend of old and new mechanisms. Rather than take a "snapshot" of an instructor's teaching in a brief visit to the online classroom, the OIES guides an instructor on a daily basis as necessary throughout the eight-week term. The process emphasizes the instructor as a reflective and involved participant in the evaluation process.

Retention and Promotion. The Online Instructor Evaluation System is an innovative and bold process to mentor and evaluate instructors on their ability to facilitate online courses. Park uses the results for retention, hiring, retraining, and promotion decisions. The OIES demonstrates a move forward in distance education as it provides a working model for other institutions to emulate and develop their own evaluation process for online instructors.

Mentoring and Evaluation Blend. Faculty evaluation sometimes is considered an infringement upon academic freedom; however, the establishment of an evaluation process illustrates a commitment by Park University to academic quality for students, instructors, and the field of distance education. The OIES is atypical in that it mentors and evaluates. The mentoring aspect benefits instructors who are new to online instruction or new to Park University. These new instructors may be unaware of Park specific policies and guidelines; having a mentor during a term of actual online teaching allows them to function as a bona fide Park online instructor, yet with the reassurance that they can rely on their mentor/evaluator for help and guidance. The evaluation aspect benefits the College for Distance Learning and the various departments by providing information about these online instructors. Departments use the information to prioritize adjunct instructor assignments; and the College for Distance Learning uses information about compliance with Park policies and procedures.

Retention of Instructors. Instructor retention of adjunct instructors is a cost-effective practice. Once a new instructor is familiar with Park policies and best online practices, institutional resources can be focused on maintaining and supporting them rather than on locating and training new instructors in a "revolving door" process.

Academic and Administrative Roles. The Online Instructor Evaluators are an asset to the University as they serve in both academic and administrative capacities. For a new instructor, having access to a mentor with both academic and administrative insights is like a "one-stop shop". Frequently the Online Instructor Evaluators become the "online knowledge expert" for their mentees because they can explain administrative aspects of the university. The Online Instructor Evaluators hold faculty appointments also, and must adhere to the same policies and requirements. They are an excellent resource for online instructors.

Annual Review of the System. The OIES uses a process of annual revision and enhancement to reflect changes in Park policy, technology advancements, and/or theory and practice modifications. All the Online Instructor Evaluators converge on campus to plan and to distribute

responsibility for necessary revisions. This annual revision includes an OIES Review Board comprised of a rich diversity of Park stakeholders (administrators, online support staff, full time faculty, part time faculty). Additionally, OIES faculty who were evaluated during the prior year are invited to a focus group to explore their perceptions and recommendations for change.

For Replication / Adaptation

The Online Instructor Evaluation System is tailored to the needs of Park University yet its core function – to maximize student learning through best online practices – can be duplicated by any institution. The criteria in the Formative and Summative Review forms are derived from acclaimed works by nationally known Chickering and Ehrmann (1996) and can be modified easily to meet institutional needs. The College for Distance Learning Standards & Principles are maintained at:

http://www.park.edu/online/instructor/Best_Practices/principles_and_standards.html

Park University includes 42 campus centers in addition to the physical home campus in Parkville, Missouri. The OIES provides consistent standards and expectations which can be adapted for on-campus evaluation for its many campus centers if it chooses to move in that direction. Additional variations include:

- Formative and Summative Review forms can be modified for term or semester schedules.
- Summative evaluations can be adopted as departmental or institutional portfolio requirements or as supplements.
- The end results can be used by institutions as part of institutional assessment for regional or professional accreditation agencies.
- The OIES is housed in a secure online portal; however, the course documents can be duplicated and archived by other institutions in word document form rather than through completely online forms.

through Peer Review Evaluation Systems.”

Use of Collaborative Problem Solving

The Online Instructor Evaluators bring a diverse set of skills and background. All have substantial experience in the online teaching/learning environment, and their academic disciplines vary widely. The Instructor Evaluator team functions very smoothly in a collaborative mode and is committed to the best possible methods for monitoring and maintaining quality.

Every aspect of online education at Park University occurs through collaboration. From the moment of situating a course within a programmatic and curricular context, through all stages of

syllabus formation, course design, development, delivery, departmental sanctions, curriculum committee and Quality Matters approvals, and on through to faculty training, we strive to anticipate and solve issues and problems related to offering a quality product to our students. Every online instructor is welcomed to Park with the understanding that our goals, priorities, and focus center on providing our students with the best educational experience available. Once the product is in place, the next logical step is to ensure that the instructor possesses the proper skills, mindset, and expertise to facilitate student learning. The Online Instructor Evaluation System brings to fruition these high standards and the demands of modern distance education.