



VANDERBILT

Office of Digital Education

Introduction

This document aims to ensure consistency in the quality of online and hybrid credit-bearing graduate and professional programs (e.g. degree, for-credit certificates) across Vanderbilt. The standards outlined in this document are rooted in best practices and aligned with The Vanderbilt Way, promoting engaging, rigorous and collaborative learning experiences for online learners. While we encourage academic units to use this as a resource for program planning, please reach out to the Office of Digital Education (digital@vanderbilt.edu) to discuss new online and hybrid programs in more detail.

The guidelines are broken into the following categories:

Category	Description
Marketing & Admissions	Provides guidance around market research, program marketing, admissions and enrollment.
Student Services	Outlines expectations for providing students access to a network of Vanderbilt support services tailored for online students.
Instruction & Course Design	Documents standards related to content and instructional design, including curriculum, course development, and instructor engagement.
Assessment and Evaluation	Summarizes key considerations around online program evaluation, assessment and accreditation.

Marketing & Admissions Standards

Market Research

The development of new online and hybrid programs should be grounded in a robust market analysis, including compelling evidence of market demand, a competitive landscape scan, and explanation of how this program will address an unmet market / learner need. Thorough market research ensures the financial sustainability and strategic growth of VU's online portfolio.

Standard	Description
Environmental Market Analysis	<p>Conduct thorough environmental scan to inform strategy and ensure financial sustainability of the program:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What is market demand for this program? This can be measured by degree program enrollments and conferrals (https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/) - Is this program job/skill aligned? Adult learners are looking to upskill and reskill. Programs that lead to specific job outcomes will have generally have greater ROI for learners, and therefore greater success recruiting learners. - How is the labor market trending for relevant jobs/skills? - What is the unmet learner / market need this program is addressing?
Competitive Analysis	<p>Conduct competitive research to consider the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How saturated is the space for this online / hybrid program? - How are competitor programs priced? - How are competitive programs structured? - How will this program be differentiated?
Learner Needs	<p>Conduct learner demand research to guide program marketing and design:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Defines a value proposition that demonstrates understanding of learner needs - Considers learner needs in program design (flexibility, affordability, outcomes, high quality, access to world-class faculty)

Marketing

Programs should be prepared to invest in strategic digital marketing campaigns that are integral to the success of online programs. As the online space is increasingly competitive, learners have greater choice and sophisticated marketing is critical for learner recruitment.

Standard	Description
Investment	New online and hybrid programs typically require significant investment in marketing. Programs should be prepared to support sophisticated marketing efforts, including digital advertising, search engine optimization, lead generation, web development and media buying.
Accuracy & Disclosure	Marketing materials communicate accurate information regarding the program's mission, accreditation status, courses, learning objectives, services, policies, fees and other factors is disclosed to prospective students. Outcomes of the program are frequently published.

Admissions & Enrollment

Online programs must aim to recruit high-quality students who are admitted into the program based on rigorous, selective standards and offer students efficient, high-touch enrollment services.

Standard	Description
Admissions and Enrollment	<p>The program will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Maintain rigorous admissions standards equivalent to those for residential programs - Conduct competitive research to inform admissions standards - Adhere to a 5-10 day admissions decision turnaround - Provide high-touch enrollment services support to ensure conversion (e.g. use of enrollment counselors, lead nurturing)
Student Onboarding	<p>Adopts and implements student onboarding methods that set up students for success, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduces important resources, faculty and student support services - Introduces online learning technologies and successful online learning practices - Establishes standards for communications with learners - Establishes standards for timely, effective technical support - Fosters community and facilitates - Mirrors format of program in that students take asynchronous online onboarding courses to familiarize themselves with key resources and expectations and students attend a live virtual session for community building.
Equity and Access	Program policies and practices support students' ability to access the program. Accommodations are available to meet a variety of student needs. All learners are ensured equitable access to the program.

Student Services Standards

Student Support and Services

Students enrolled in online programs should be provided access to a network of Vanderbilt support services that are tailored for online students. Access to such resources ensures inclusion in the Vanderbilt community and sets students up for success.

Standard	Description
Academic	Programs will be equipped to support students through their rigorous online learning journey. In partnership with centers such as the Writing Studio, Tutoring Services, and the Library, students can be assured their success is top of mind.
Advisement	<p>Students will have extensive understanding about program requirements, financial commitments, and technology need to succeed. Program provides admissions advisement during the recruitment & enrollment process.</p> <p>Contact information for student specific questions and interaction is easily identified.</p>
Access	<p>Students are easily able to obtain information to aid their academic success and contact experts for further clarification. A program website exists with a focus on current enrolled students and the following information:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Program Curriculum - Support Resources - Contact Information - IT/Technology considerations (Brightspace, VUIT)
Community	<p>The program builds a network of peers at all levels to minimize feelings of isolation. Faculty, student, and staff advisors should be key contributors. The program should be prepared to present a plan on how they will create an online learner community from pre-arrival to alumni. In addition, ODE agrees to partner with the program by:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. providing pre-arrival swag bags to accepted students. 2. launching learner profiles and spotlights to be featured on website/news outlets. 3. collaborating on the design of orientation programming.
Communication	<p>Program provides frequent and timely updates to students. Communications focus on academics, highlights, and future aspirations. ODE launches a centralized communication tool for all program students (i.e. Slack or Microsoft Teams).</p> <p>Program hosts one Town Hall per semester (in concert with ODE team) to receive real-time feedback for continuous improvement.</p>
Career	Programs assist students to successfully launch or transition their career paths. Through a partnership with the Career Center, programs will provide access to coaching, programming if applicable, and alumni network tools.
Well-Being	Programs are dedicated to supporting the holistic well-being of their students. From mental, physical, cultural financial well-being and everything in between. In partnership with the Dean of Students and Student Care Network, online learners will have access to residential services in a virtual manner.
Technology	Students are equipped with the tools and technology to be successful in the program. They are provided adequate training and 24/7 technology support.

Instruction and Course Design Standards

Program Level	
Online programs should adopt and implement instructional design methods that enable effective online instruction and promote engaging, collaborative, rigorous learning experiences across the student journey. Thoughtful program design should consider providing students a consistent experience across courses.	
Standard	Description
Program Curriculum	Intentional program design should ensure the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The program has clearly stated goals and objectives - The program organizes course offerings in a way that learners can navigate - The program curriculum is well-sequenced - Courses included in the program integrate quality instructional materials to enable and enrich learning - Courses provide opportunities for interaction that support active learning - Courses meet copyright law and fair use guidelines - instructional materials are up-to-date and relevant to The learner. - Courses offered in The program are designed using research-based design principles such as backward design, to improve learner engagement and comprehension.
Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Courses offered through the program utilize regularly evaluated technology that supports the learning goals. - technology is evaluated for reliability, usability across different operating systems, and for protecting learner data/privacy. - technology is leveraged consistently across courses.
Community and Engagement	Program fosters community and engagement across the student journey: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide communications tools to foster student communication and community - If appropriate, includes a short, optional, in-person learning experience on campus to promote community and a connection to Vanderbilt - Design delivery format that is conducive for engagement (asynchronous v. synchronous): Generally, we recommend 20-25% of content should be delivered synchronously.
Program Syllabus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Program-level objectives are clearly defined and create an overarching goal for the program's individual courses. -Establishes grading policies for the program's courses
Faculty and staff (instructional staff)	All instructional staff are trained in online course design and collaborate with an instructional designer for defining course objectives, planning modules, learning new technology, and creating assessments. Instructional staff is trained to identify underperforming students and in student support procedures including how to contact the care team.

Course Level	
Courses within the broader program should apply best practices for instructional design, clearly defining learning objectives, designing student-centered activities and developing engaging, inclusive course materials and rigorous assessments.	
Standard	Description
Course Syllabus	Details course objectives, any required supplies, course policies, proctoring requirements, grade policy, course etiquette, attendance, tech support and requirements
Learning objectives	Define and communicate measurable course and modular learning objectives using terminology from Bloom's taxonomy that align with overall program objectives. At least one course learning object should align with program learning objectives.
Student-centered activities	A quality program will: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tie activities to learning objectives. - Activities should challenge students to apply the knowledge they are learning through lecture videos and readings. - Facilitate peer learning through structured discussions, group activities and collaboration.
Rigorous, frequent assessments	At the course level: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Align assessments with learning objectives. - Provide students multiple opportunities to demonstrate learning through informal, formative assessments that can be used to assess progress throughout the course. - Use rubrics when possible to provide clear expectations and assessment criteria. - Scaffold assignments by breaking them into smaller parts when possible. - Use a variety of assessment tools including discussion assignments, peer review, auto-graded quizzes, and graded group projects.
Standard Brightspace Template	All courses in the program should leverage the Lesson View template in Brightspace to ensure ease of navigation and access to materials
High-quality, engaging media	Programs will: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Create short, focused, highly-produced lecture videos (5-8 minutes long) with graphics and animation that keep the learner's attention. - Build in mechanism to ensure students are watching the videos (e.g. in video prompts and quizzes)
Accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Design documents and videos to ensure accessibility for all students. - When possible, leverage Open Educational Resources (OER), such as free public textbooks, worksheets and readings to reduce both learner costs and faculty time spent creating materials.
Inclusive course materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Establish and support a course climate that fosters belonging for all students - Set explicit student expectations for course engagement behavior - Select course content that recognize diversity and acknowledges barriers to inclusion
Course community	A quality course will: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use discussion boards, peer review and group work activities to encourage peer learning. - Provide students the space to interact socially through live session breakouts. - Encourage study groups among participants and provide discussion boards for sharing challenges/successes and advice
Instructor / student engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Clearly communicate course roadmap and expectations through syllabus and grading rubrics - Provide frequent and prompt feedback to students through weekly office hours - Respond to student questions over email within 24 hours during weekdays and 48 hours on weekends or clearly defined SLA
Student progress	Student progress in each course can and should be monitored using Brightspace Class Progress tool.

Program Evaluation and Assessment

Program Evaluation

Online programs should implement a process for frequent program evaluation to ensure programs are meeting quality expectations, driving positive student outcomes, and serving student needs. Findings from program evaluations should inform continuous improvement efforts.

Standard	Description
Ongoing internal evaluations	These are conducted to review: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Data based on national, state and/or program metrics 2. Evaluate learner success 3. Alignment of course learning objectives and outcomes with program learning objectives
Course Review Process	A process for reviewing and evaluating courses is implemented to ensure quality, consistency with the curriculum and advancement of student learning objectives. Evaluation results are communicated to program stakeholders.
Faculty Review Process	Ongoing internal evaluations are set up to ensure faculty are evaluated on an ongoing basis and that faculty are using clear, consistent policies, measures and procedures.

Program Assessment and Accreditation

Online programs must meet institutional accreditation requirements and industry standards.

Standard	Description
Institutional Accreditation	<p>Educational programs must engage in ongoing (annual) assessment to evaluate student learning outcomes (minimum of 3). Quality program assessment plans feature learning outcomes, each of which is evaluated by two (or more) different metrics (such as research papers, portfolios graded using a rubric, exams specific to certain content, etc.). Course-level learning outcomes should align with and support program objectives.</p> <p>The program must also demonstrate that the student who registers in the online program is the same student who participates in or completes the program and receives the credit by verifying the identity of a student who participates in the program through 1) secure login and pass code 2) proctored examinations 3) new or other technologies or practices that are effective in verifying student identification.</p> <p>Information resulting program assessment plans are then synthesized to identify modifications to courses, content, teaching method, etc. designed to improve student learning.</p>
NC-SARA Authorization	<p>As a NC-SARA participating institution, Vanderbilt must ensure that programs sponsoring online/hybrid education abide by standards set forth by the US Department of Education. Of particular importance to Vanderbilt's Digital Education programs are the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - appropriate length and requirements for completion - course content is appropriate and expectations of student engagement is clear - qualified faculty with training in delivering online education, and who engage in "substantive interactions" with students which are "scheduled and predictable" - adequate and appropriate resources to engage in learning as well as for general student support - regulated access to ensure student privacy and verification of student identity <p>If the program involves out of state student learning placements, please consult the Office of Academic Program Review, Assessment and Accreditation for further guidance.</p>
Industry Standards	The program must meet or exceed industry standards related to course rigor and diploma-completion requirements. It must prepare students for careers.