

Recommendations for Designing Online and Blended Learning Courses

PLU has as two of its ideals academic excellence and access to this academic excellence for all. **Online** courses (i.e., courses where all instruction, conversation and assessment takes place online) and **blended learning** courses (i.e., courses where some instruction, conversation and assessment takes place online and some of it takes place in a “bricks and mortar” classroom) at PLU extend the university’s mission beyond campus borders, providing high-quality options that meet a variety of student needs while fostering strong student-faculty relationships and learning communities.

Moreover, PLU has made a commitment to strengthening its non-traditional course offerings in *PLU 2020* by stating that: “The University should broaden its ongoing efforts to support the evolving use technology in our academic, co-curricular, and living, learning and work environments” (*PLU 2020*, p. 35).

PLU has officially offered blended courses since fall 2014 and online courses since summer 2015. Online courses are typically offered to undergraduate students during summer and J-Term, while blended courses can be offered during any term. Graduate courses vary by program.

Online courses at PLU:

According to the PLU website:

In an **online course**, all instructional activities are completed through web-based interactions, with no face-to-face meetings occurring on campus. Online courses achieve the same learning objectives as traditional courses, but include instructional activities tailored to be most effective in the online environment. Online courses may include online lessons, recorded lectures, assigned reading, online discussion, group and independent activities, web conferences, and technology-enabled projects. Online courses are only offered during summer terms or during j-term.

While industry standard **online** courses may sometimes be as little as 80 per-cent online, the intention of these courses at PLU is to make them available for any student wanting the PLU experience anywhere on the planet with an internet connection.

Accordingly, PLU instructors should plan to make the course 100 per-cent functional using only the internet and the Sakai LMS with provision made for electronic office hours that are defined in the syllabus (although instructors are certainly encouraged to schedule face-to-face office hours for the course as they wish, provided that a similar electronic resource is also available).

Blended courses at PLU:

According to the PLU website:

Blended courses utilize face-to-face and online learning options in a carefully designed mix of both. The specific format of each blended course will depend on the learning objectives and style of the instructor. Typically, a blended course includes significant online instruction and activities; face-to-face meetings may be reduced to ensure the total workload still equals a traditional course. A blended

course's onsite meeting schedule is determined in advance by each individual instructor. Blended courses may be offered during any academic term.

As an industry standard, Blended courses generally replace 30-79 per-cent of face-to-face seat time with technology-enhanced instruction.

All blended and online courses at PLU should be developed in consultation with department chairs and/or deans prior to implementation. The exact ratio of face-to-face instruction and technology-enhanced instruction will vary according to the nature of the course, the vision of the instructor, and the approval of the instructor's department chair.

Teaching Online and Blended Courses at PLU

As faculty develop new courses that may exist entirely or partly in new instructional delivery systems (managed within the Sakai Learning Management System [LMS]), the University recommends that faculty keep the following recommendations in mind:

- The two most important pillars of a PLU education are its ideals academic excellence and access to this academic excellence for all. All modalities must guarantee a high level of academic excellence and regular access to the instructor, either in person or through regular personal interaction using technology as an aid.
- Students will expect that the PLU experience of small class sizes, individual attention, a supportive learning community, and personal access to the instructor will be part of their online experience as in any other PLU course.
- Departments and divisions will continue to expect that courses are taught within the boundaries of their academic and accreditation requirements and within the cultural norms of their respective departments. All courses developed for various departments intended for blended and online delivery should be developed in consultation with the appropriate deans and chairs.
- Blended and online courses should be developed to meet expectations that are already advertised on the PLU website so that students know what to expect when they enroll in a non-traditional course.
- Faculty should be careful not to create a "course-and-a-half" when designing non-traditional, especially blended, courses. Work expectations should be the same regardless of which kind of learning delivery system is implemented.
- Students enrolling in blended and online courses should understand that they will be expected to work independently and have a heightened sense of organization and time management in order to be successful. They will also need to have reliable computer and access to high-speed internet. In many cases they will also need speakers, headphones, a microphone, and/or a webcam. In all cases, they will need to be familiar with PLU's version of the Sakai LMS to complete course work. This information will need to be communicated to students in advance of the course's beginning date.
- Faculty wishing to teach officially designated online or blended courses at PLU are required to take PLU's PLUTO training so that their teaching will meet the standards of PLU-brand online education.
- Face-to-face 4-credit courses taught at universities around the country and at PLU usually involve three or four hours of face-to-face instruction per week for a typical four-credit course. Faculty should be careful that online and blended delivery systems have similar expectations. Accordingly:

- Blended Learning courses should generally adhere to industry standards of online versus face-to-face instruction (see above).
- The amount of face-to-face vs. online instruction in the course should be listed in the course description.
- Blended courses should be designed to allow opportunities for interaction with peers and the instructor in the same ratio as in other PLU courses. The nature of these interactions (either face-to-face or through technology or both) should be defined in the syllabus.
- One-to-one “office hours” should be offered in the same ratio as in other PLU courses. If the office hours are held using technology, there should still be clear parameters about how and when students may make appointments with faculty for feedback in the syllabus.
- Exceptions to this standard should have a clear rationale and should be cleared with the Chair of the affected department prior to offering the course.

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