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Key Elements for Observing and Evaluating Online Teaching

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1. **Description of the session (300 -500 words):** A report on distance learning in higher education by the Pew Research Center indicates that at least 90 percent of traditional four-year colleges and universities offered online courses; and this trend is continuing upward. Given the near ubiquitous offering of online courses, it is not surprising that accrediting agencies include specific expectations that online courses be “comparable” or “equivalent” to traditional face-to-face courses and that institutional standards and policies regarding academic courses, objectives, and outcomes apply to them as well.

With so many online courses it is obvious that a large number of faculty in all disciplines are teaching online. So, how are they doing?

Most institutions have over time developed systems and protocols for teaching evaluation that are used in many decisions including faculty reappointment, tenure, and promotion. These evaluation systems often include questionnaires soliciting student feedback; a review of syllabi; and peer, chair, or dean visitations to faculty classrooms.

The use of classroom observations in faculty evaluation has been noted and discussed in publications of the American Association of University Professors since 1975. In a more recent review of its policy statement, the AAUP reiterated that emphasis “should be upon obtaining first-hand evidence of teaching competence” mostly likely by other faculty in the department or by the students who are in the courses. In addition, the AAUP statement urged that institutions among other things, be clear about “what visitors look for.”

This presentation will focus on what classroom observers “look at” during a visitation and how the components of an online observation are cognates, or not, of traditional classroom visits and evaluations.

The session has six parts:

1. An introduction and review of the goals of the session
2. An interactive discussion of elements of classroom observation and teaching effectiveness evaluation currently practiced in participants’ home institutions.
3. Overview of observable similarities and differences between online and traditional instruction.
4. Review of case studies of faculty who chose different combinations of observable elements to be included in their teaching evaluation.
5. Participant engagement and “dot vote” of elements they believe would be most helpful in their home institutions.
6. Q and A session and Wrap-up.

Additional information will be provided in handouts that can be used to focus follow-on discussions in the participants’ departments or schools.

Committee on Teaching, Research, and Publication (2005). Statement on Teaching Evaluation. Washington: American Association of University Professors.

Green, R. G. (2008). Tenure and promotion decisions: The relative importance of teaching, scholarship, and service. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 44(2), 117–27.

Middle States Commission on Higher Education (2011). *Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education*. Philadelphia: Middle States Commission on Higher Education

Pew Research Center (2011). *The Digital Revolution and Higher Education*. Washington: Pew Research Center.