



Online Instruction Handbook

for the

Schools of Graduate and Professional Programs (SGPP)

2026

Table of Contents

Section	Page
Introduction	2
Definitions of Education Modalities	2
Regular and Substantive Interaction (RSI)	2
Expectations for New Instructors	3
Course Preparation Expectations	4
Course Facilitation Expectations	4
AI Resources and Support	7
CELT Resources and Support	7
Canvas	7
Zoom and Panopto	7
Library and Writing Center Resources and Support	7

Introduction

The Saint Mary's University of Minnesota Online Instruction Manual is designed as a comprehensive resource for faculty teaching courses using distance education technologies at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota (SMUMN). This guide aims to:

1. outline policies and procedures specific to online courses at SMUMN;
2. define academic standards that align with and exceed distance education requirements at state and federal levels;
3. promote consistency in the design, delivery, and evaluation of online courses across all SMUMN programs; and
4. provide faculty and program administrators with information about available resources and support for teaching in the online environment.

This guide represents the collective expertise and input of faculty, staff, and administration dedicated to fostering excellence in online education. It has been reviewed and endorsed by the University Academic Council and is accessible to all faculty via the Academic Affairs website.

Distance Education

Distance education, as defined by federal regulations under Title IV, involves the use of technology to deliver instruction when students and instructors are physically separated, requiring regular and substantive interaction to maintain academic quality. Saint Mary's University of Minnesota ensures that its distance education programs meet rigorous academic and regulatory standards consistent across all instructional modalities.

Definitions of Delivery modalities

In-Person: 100% of the instruction takes place when the instructor and students are physically present in the same location, such as a classroom. Both the instructor and students meet on a regular, scheduled basis, allowing for direct, in-person interaction.

Online: 100% of the course content and activities are delivered using distance education technologies. While most online programs are structured to support asynchronous instruction and interaction, some may include mandatory synchronous components based on the program's design.

Hybrid: Instruction and interaction is delivered using a combination of distance education technologies and in-person classroom meetings, when the instructor and students are in the same location. This modality is sometimes referred to internally at Saint Mary's as "blended".

Regular and Substantive Interaction (RSI)

Regular Substantive Interaction (RSI) in distance education refers to meaningful and consistent engagement between students and their instructors and the educational content. These interactions are critical to fostering high-quality learning, requiring instructors to actively engage with students in a meaningful manner, ensuring consistent, tailored support that aligns with the course content and outcomes (Department of Education, 2020, pp. 54757-54748). This ensures that **the instructor is**

actively present and encourages students to move beyond passive absorption of information to actively participate in the learning process.

The U.S. Department of Education now requires that all online courses for which students may use Title IV funds (federal financial aid) "ensure that there is regular and substantive interaction between students and faculty." Aligned with the Federal Definition, the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) also mandates that institutions ensure "regular and substantive interaction" in distance education. HLC further details expectations for both regular and substantive engagement to promote meaningful instructor-student interaction as noted below.

Regular Interaction: "An institution ensures regular interaction between a student and an instructor or instructors by, prior to the student's completion of a course or competency:

1. Providing the opportunity for substantive interactions with the student on a predictable and scheduled basis commensurate with the length of time and the amount of content in the course or competency; and
2. Monitoring the student's academic engagement and success and ensuring that an instructor is responsible for promptly and proactively engaging in substantive interaction with the student when needed on the basis of such monitoring, or upon request by the student.

A minimum of one hour of online office time must be scheduled weekly for asynchronous online courses. Online office hours represent scheduled times when an instructor is available via video technology (Zoom, Google Meets, or similar) to answer student questions or discuss course topics. The days and times of weekly online office hours must be listed in the syllabus and Canvas so that students are aware of the schedule at the start of the course. Instructors teaching online courses with a combination of synchronous and asynchronous online sessions are also encouraged to schedule online office hours.

Substantive Interaction: "Substantive interaction is engaging students in teaching, learning and assessment, consistent with the content under discussion, and also includes at least two of the following:

1. Providing direct instruction [videos, recorded lectures, synchronous meetings, etc.];
2. Assessing or providing feedback on a student's coursework;
3. Providing information or responding to questions about the content of a course or competency;
4. Facilitating a group discussion regarding the content of a course or competency; or
5. Other instructional activities approved by HLC or the program's accrediting agency." (HLC, n.d.).

More information can be found in Saint Mary's University of Minnesota's *Delivery Modality and Regular and Substantive Interaction Policy*.

The following expectations are based upon and extend these academic standards.

Expectations for New Instructors

- ALL new faculty are expected to successfully complete before they begin teaching:
 - New Faculty Orientation (self-paced online training)
 - Upon receiving notification of academic ranking, new faculty are provided instructions for enrolling in the New Faculty Orientation training in Canvas. New faculty are expected to complete the training within two months of enrollment.
 - Canvas Essentials (30-minute webinar)
 - Set up a Qualtrics account ([directions](#))
- All faculty contracted to teach an online course for the 1st time are expected to have adequate instructional technology skills and are encouraged to attend the 4-week Online Instructor Certification training.
- These events and more can be found on the [CELT Events Calendar](#)

Course Preparation Expectations

- Submit your syllabus, using the most current [Syllabus Template Documents](#) to your program director a minimum of 3 weeks before the course begins. Exceptions may apply if the program director provides alternative instructions.
- Provide current contact information and scheduled availability to students on your syllabus.
- Ensure your Canvas course site is up to date and ready using the [Course Readiness Checklist](#)
- Post your course syllabus in Canvas at least 2 weeks before the start of class.
- Make the course available to students, by [publishing it](#) 2 weeks prior to course start date, unless the course is auto-published.

Course Facilitation Expectations

- Follow the course start and end dates established by the registrar.
- [Take attendance online in Canvas](#) during the first 3 weeks and monitor throughout the course.
 - Attendance is determined by participation in an academic activity including:
 - Participating in a online discussion
 - Attending a synchronous virtual class meeting
 - Submitting/completing an online activity or assignment
 - Engaging in an exam/quiz, interactive tutorial, or computer-assisted instruction
 - Initiating contact with a faculty member with questions regarding the academic subject studied in the course.

- Maximize student retention by closely monitoring activity and reaching out to students who show a lack of interaction.
- Inform students in advance of grading timelines for all assignments.
- At the beginning of the course, provide a *course overview* to orient students to the course design and expectations via a recorded video or synchronous session.
- Foster a sense of *instructor presence* through weekly communication and interaction:
 - Post your bio and a welcome message by the first week of class.
 - Communicate with the class at least once a week via announcements in Canvas.
 - Consider scheduling virtual office hours
 - Respond to student inquiries within 24 hours.
 - Notify your program director and students in advance if you will be momentarily absent.
 - Provide timely, personalized, meaningful feedback on student work using clear and concise language.
- Offer feedback on formative weekly learning activities (e.g. online discussions or application activities) within 3 to 5 days and on summative course assignments (e.g. papers, projects) within 7 days of the due date.
- Post final course grades online no later than 7 calendar days after the last class meeting. For doctoral and Ed.S. courses, post within 14 days.
- Remind students to complete the online course evaluation the last week of course.
- Contribute to course improvement by sharing any issues or suggestions to your program director.

Step-by-Step Guidelines for Facilitating Effective Online Learning

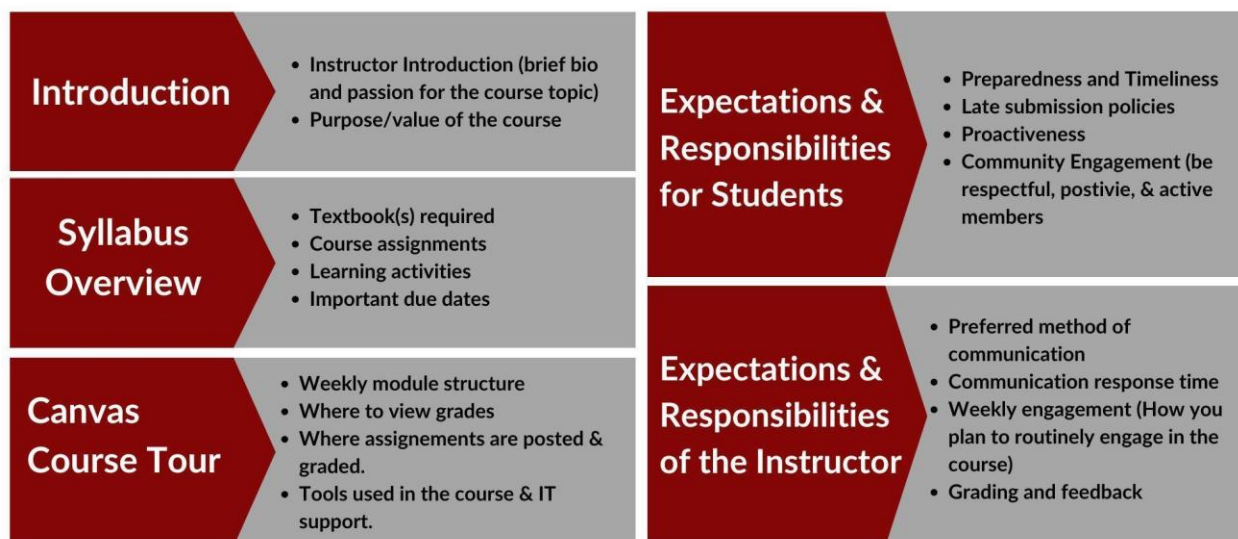
First-Day Tasks

1. Send a Welcome Announcement

Introduce yourself and provide a warm welcome to students. Here is a [welcome email example](#) to consider. Here is [how to post an announcement](#).

2. Share a Course Overview

Provide students with a clear course overview. This can be written or recorded and delivered synchronously or asynchronously. Below are elements to include.



Weekly Instructor Engagement

1. **Create a Consistent Pattern of Engagement (see Example)**
 - Routinely monitor and prompt student participation.
 - Respond to group activities such as discussions.
 - Respond to individual activities such as exercises and application tasks.
2. **Provide Regular Feedback**
Post meaningful and substantive feedback and points earned in a prompt manner.
3. **Weekly Wrap-Ups**
Summarize the week's activities, highlight key takeaways, and set the stage for the upcoming week.
4. **Track What Works**
Keep notes on effective practices and areas for improvement to refine your course for future terms.

End of Course Closing and Reflection

1. **Send a Closing Email**
A thoughtful closing message that brings meaningful closure to the class. It can:
 - Summarize central ideas and review content.
 - Celebrate the students' accomplishments.
 - Motivate students to continue learning and applying the course concepts.
 - Create a lasting connection between you and the students.
2. **Reflect on Your Course**
Consider these key questions:
 - What worked well?
 - What can be improved in terms of content, materials, and Canvas functions?
 - Are there any immediate updates or key considerations for future instructors?

AI Commons

- [AI Commons Website](#)

CELT Resources and Support

- [Saint Mary's Canvas Support Resources](#) (*opens in Canvas*)
- [Course Readiness Checklist](#)
- [CELT Recorded Trainings](#)

Canvas

- [Canvas Essentials Training Video](#)
 - [How to modify a page in Canvas](#)
 - [How to create an announcement](#)
 - [How to create an assignment in Canvas](#)
 - [Uploading a document \(syllabus or any others\) using the rich-text toolbar](#)
 - [Using SpeedGrader to score an assignment and give feedback](#)
 - [Using SpeedGrader to annotate a submitted assignment](#)

Panopto and Zoom

- [A video walkthrough of Zoom and Panopto from SMU Helpdesk](#)
- [Step-by-step instructions on using Zoom integration with Panopto](#)

Library Resources and Support

- [Library website](#)

Writing Center Resources and Support

- [Writing Centers website](#)