James Madison University


Best Practices for
Online Programs


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# JMU Online Program Best Practices

## I. Introduction

The intent for online degree programs and services is aligned with the overarching JMU mission statement: We are a community committed to preparing students to be educated and enlightened citizens who lead productive and meaningful lives.

James Madison University is committed to providing quality programs regardless of the delivery format. This document focuses specifically on standards and guidelines for online programs that affirm the JMU. To ensure the university's commitment to the highest standards of quality, it endorses the following core values and best practices that establish standards for online programs. The core values that guide online instructional practices at JMU are based closely on the best practices guidelines of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC).

These guidelines are based on a widespread agreement that has emerged in the research literature, educational policy organizations, and institutional practice. Together they constitute a converging set of evidence-based best practices for assessing the quality and effectiveness of online programs offered by JMU and for guiding its online education practices and policies. For the purposes of this document, "online program" is defined as a program where 51% of the courses are delivered online.

## II. Institutional Context and Commitment

The addition of targeted online programs to the traditional delivery format represents a natural technological progression to fulfill a need for our targeted student population.

The proposal of additional online programs does not represent a change in the institution's established mission and vision. Instead, the development of online programs supports the institution's focus on accessibility and outreach to students.

A change in the delivery format of a program to online will follow the identified process in accordance with guidelines from our accrediting commission and a policy for the review and approval of those changes.

Once a program is initiated, the program will provide an opportunity for all active students to complete the program of study.

## III.  Curriculum and Instruction

The curriculum and instruction of online programs will be fully comparable in rigor to the same curriculum delivered on campus. JMU assures that the rigor and breadth of online programs equals those of traditionally taught programs by requiring that attainable, clear learning outcomes are identified for each online program. JMU policies regarding articulation and transfer are based on learning outcomes, not on the mode of delivery. Articulation and transfer policies are consistent throughout the individual academic units regardless of the modality of the program

New online programs follow the university's existing standard C&I review process for new programs. The delivery format of the program is identified and while modality is not a deciding factor in the approval of new academic programs, online offerings require additional information to be submitted as part of the curriculum preview process.

Proposals for new online programs explain how the academic program complements and is defined in relation with other JMU degree programs. The same is true for existing programs transitioning to online delivery.

As part of the program proposal, new online programs identify success measures (need for the program, enrollment targets, completion targets, prospects of job availability, etc.) The same is true for existing programs transitioning to online delivery.

Proposals for online programs must list required courses and credit hours, identifying the minimum required credit hours, and include an outline of requirements and electives. Graduate level programs identify special skills such as research methods or other competencies required for completion. The program information includes a description of any requirements not offered electronically to assure all students have access to appropriate services.

The development of all new undergraduate programs, including those offered online, must include the established general education requirements.

The university has in place a process to identify changes in delivery that constitute a substantive change in accordance with guidelines from our accrediting commission and a policy for the review and approval of those changes (Policy 2102).

Proposals for new academic programs or programs moving from traditional to online offering should begin the C&I process at least one full year before the program is scheduled to begin admitting students.

### Faculty Credentials
Appropriately credentialed faculty members are responsible for program development, coordination and assessment regardless of the mode of offering of the academic program. Courses within programs are taught by academically qualified instructors.

Faculty teaching in online programs are not technology experts, but are encouraged to attend training as identified in the Faculty Training section of this document. Orientation, training programs and professional development opportunities are available to faculty in various formats including immersive institutes, workshops and consultations. Support for ongoing professional development is also offered.

It is the responsibility of the academic unit head to approve the mode of delivery for each course, as well as the faculty member assigned to teach within the program.

**Courses**
Courses within an online program adhere to the course-level guidelines set forth in the *JMU Best Practices for Online and Hybrid Courses* document.

## IV.  Technology

**University Technological Structure**
Online programs benefit from the university's current technological structure, which undergoes continual review and improvement based on the offices of Information Technology and the Center for Instructional Technology's long-range plan and budget. The core infrastructure includes the campus network and storage system, the campus identity management system and classrooms.

Campus Network: Broadband connections within buildings and between buildings are essential to support instructional applications within the confines of the campus. Connections to the edge of campus enable off-campus students and faculty to access services and resources, which reside on the campus network, and to participate in on-campus classes designed to accommodate on-campus and distance students simultaneously. Furthermore, JMU recently joined National Lambda Rail and Internet2; the resulting broadband connectivity opens up possibilities for high resolution, multi-point video conferencing, access to large data stores and visualization and simulation projects, and connections with distance learning students in a variety of settings.

Campus Storage Network: Another key element of core infrastructure is the campus storage network. The need for storage capacity will continue to increase, especially as the demand for video, large data sets and other space-heavy content increases. Video is one of the key elements in JMU's instructional strategy.

Security and Identity Management: Another less visible but still critical piece of core infrastructure is the security and identity management architecture developed by JMU IT. That architecture enables targeted delivery of online services based on student and faculty attributes, for example, membership in a particular course section. It also allows JMU students and faculty to take

advantage of cloud computing and supplementary learning resources that live off campus.

Classrooms: Technology has become an important part of the classroom experience and often serves as the vehicle for interaction among students and faculty in the classroom. Almost all of the classrooms at JMU are network connected, equipped with at least one computer and a variety of input, output and playback devices including digital video players and projectors, graphics tablets, document cameras, and clickers. The JMU classroom infrastructure is now expanding to include video conferencing and other forms of interaction with people, resources and applications that are located off campus, including distance students and instructors.

Applications Infrastructure: Instructional applications that support large numbers of courses and students are considered to be part of the campus infrastructure. JMU's course management system consolidates many of the functions associated with managing a course – announcements, online discussion, document submission, access to course texts, grading, and synchronous communication – under a single umbrella. JMUtube, designed, built and maintained by the Center for Instructional Technology (CIT), enables JMU faculty and staff to store and deliver video and presentations. The Madison Digital Image Database (MDID), also developed by the CIT, is a digital media management system with sophisticated tools for discovering, aggregating and presenting digital media in a wide variety of learning spaces and within a secure environment. JMU's Wordpress Service allows faculty to request skilled assistance with developing engaging, interactive blog-based websites for classroom projects and research.

**Technology Selection**
Academic programs may select the core technologies most appropriate for their needs. Availability, cost and other issues are considered, but every effort is made to ensure a good match among the technology, program learning outcomes and instructional needs.

The Office of Information Technology and the Center for Instructional Technology are responsible for campus-wide oversight and relevancy of technology based on its long-range plan, security of the system and instructional needs.

Emerging technologies are continually assessed to ensure up-to-date technologies and address instructional needs.

**Provided Services and Support**
Technology associated with online programs and courses may vary depending on the area of discipline. Responsibility for special technology is outlined under the **Technology** section of the *JMU Best Practices for Online or Hybrid Courses* document.

Technical support for JMU-supported technologies is provided for all academic programs regardless of the program delivery format. Technical assistance and

support are available through IT's HelpDesk, CIT's Learning System Support team, college-level coordinators and CIT staff (Faculty Development, Media Services, Research & Development).

The Center for Instructional Technology staff assist faculty with the preparation of online delivery. The CIT staff includes Ph.D. Instructional Technologists as well as additional staff with degrees and experience with instructional design, learning theory and technical expertise.

Technology upgrades or changes are coordinated across key departments and include timelines, preparation and testing phases, implementation procedures, communication strategies, training opportunities, and plans for support resources and tutorials. Multiple communication channels are used to inform faculty, staff and students about technology upgrades or changes.

## V. Faculty

### Workload
Faculty workload involving online delivery is determined at the course level. Refer to the *JMU Best Practices for Online and Hybrid Courses* document for more information.

### Faculty Training and Development
The quality of online programs and student success in these programs is dependent upon well-trained, supported faculty. Faculty interested in teaching within online programs should conduct a self-assessment regarding the following areas:

- Competence in using the tools required to teach online.

- An understanding of the difference between online and face-to-face instruction.

- An understanding of the amount of work involved in preparing and teaching an online course.

- An understanding of the need for regular communication with student, prompt feedback, the need for student collaboration in online classes and other best practices.

- The identification of areas where there is a need for additional theoretical or practical training in online instruction.

Faculty should contact the Center for Instructional Technology (CIT) to discuss formal training opportunities and to receive information regarding the process of offering online programs.

**Faculty Support**

Orientation, training programs and professional development opportunities are available to faculty in various formats including immersive institutes, workshops and consultations. Refresher workshops and support for ongoing professional development is also offered.

Training programs and professional development opportunities are continually evaluated and changes are made to training opportunities based on feedback and changing needs.

## VI. Student Support Services

**Advising**

The same level of academic advising available to traditional students will be available to students completing a program online.

**Academic and Administrative Student Support**

JMU is committed to providing students taking online programs equal access to the university's academic and administrative support services**.**

- Students have access to support services such as the Office of the Registrar, the Business office, the JMU Bookstore, system tutorials and more through the [Student Support Resource](#) comprehensive web page on the JMU Online Best Practices website.

- Technical support services and help desk resources are provided for students who need assistance in using JMU-standard technologies and online learning technologies. Support for non-standard JMU technology is the responsibility of the instructor.

- Students should evaluate their technological competencies and their access to required technologies **prior to enrollment** to confirm that they are ready to participate in an online program by taking the *JMU Student Self-assessment Survey* (Appendix A) on the JMU Online Best Practices website.

**Disability Services**
- Students enrolled in online academic programs may request accommodations for disabilities. It is the student's responsibility to contact the Office of Disability Services and provide documentation to support the need of accommodation. Students are encouraged to initiate requests prior to the start of the program. Review of and implementation of accommodations may require collaboration with the instructor or program faculty. More information about programs and services of ODS is available at http://www.jmu.edu/ods/. For appointments, call 540.568.6705. For general questions and after hours, e-mail disability-svcs@jmu.edu

## VII. Library and Learning Resources

Students enrolled online programs have remote access to library resources to include full-text electronic books and periodicals, online research databases, subscriptions services and streaming media collections. Instructors should provide students with a list of external online library and learning resources, as course appropriate. Subject librarians should be available to assist faculty in acquiring online materials, providing library instruction sessions and student research consultations.

## VIII. Program Evaluation

All academic programs at JMU undergo two types of program evaluation. Academic Program Reviews are conducted every eight years and are a full overall evaluation of the effectiveness of a program, its resources and support, and other large-scale questions of quality. Assessment Template Reports are conducted yearly and are an examination of student learning outcomes for each academic program.

Degree Granting APRs are reviews conducted internally by undergraduate and graduate degree-granting academic programs or programs driven by student outcomes. Degree Granting APRs follow the guidelines in the *Internal Self-Study Report (available at http://www.jmu.edu/academic-affairs/apr/index.shtml)*. This comprehensive review seeks assessment and/or evaluative information about the entire academic unit. Degree Granting and Academic Support APRs must be conducted every eight years with an interim report due every four years.

All academic programs, including online programs, will be assessed using JMU's Assessment Progress Template (APT) process each year. The APT includes a review of student learning objectives, assessment methods, accomplishments and use of assessment results. Assessment reports are reviewed by a panel of faculty and scored according to a rubric, and results are shared with assessment coordinators, academic unit heads, deans, and other internal and external constituents.

The results of Academic Program Reviews and Assessment Progress Templates are communicated to program stakeholders. Results of the Academic Program Review and the Academic Program Template are used to make specific changes to the program that improve student learning. Although the academic unit chair or assessment committee can make recommendations, the conversation about how to make use of assessment findings is one in which all faculty are invited to participate. Recommendations from the previous APR are used as program objectives for future program planning.

Student performance will be evaluated in online programs in a manner consistent with traditionally delivered programs evaluations and as defined in course-level syllabi.

Program-level student learning outcomes are appropriate for students who have completed the program, indicating advanced knowledge and skills as opposed to a basic understanding of skills learned early in the programs.

Confidentiality and anonymity is protected in the conduct of assessments and evaluations and in the dissemination of results; assessment results are reported only in the aggregate and individual course-level examinations are protected through the learning management system and JMU's eID security mechanism.

Program evaluation is encouraged to be incorporated in the university-wide planning database objectives, as appropriate.

## IX. Minimize the Potential for Online Cheating

Where appropriate, JMU professors are encouraged to use the university supported plagiarism prevention service, which helps prevent plagiarism by detecting unoriginal content in student papers. It also has features designed to aid in educating students about plagiarism and importance of proper attribution of any borrowed content.

Instructors in online programs are encouraged to use a variety of non-proctored assessment methods such as unique assignments, chunking assignments, timed tests, open book tests, etc. to ensure the integrity of student work. A list of suggestions may be found in Section VII. Minimize the Potential for Online Cheating, of the *JMU Best Practices for Online and Hybrid Courses* document.

High-stakes exams require the use of a proctored environment such as local colleges/universities, local professional testing centers, online proctoring services, or the coordination of a special exam session on the campus of JMU. All proctored exam environments must require authentication of student identity. Academic units are responsible for determining the method used for proctored exams. Academic units choosing external proctoring services must work through JMU Procurement Services for current and future service agreements.

Agreements must address, at minimum, the following issues:

- Student privacy
- Fees assessed
- Notification of online testing requirements/mandates for online courses
- Guidelines for use

- Technical issues that might arise during proctored tests taken online (if applicable)

- Resolution of disputes involving remote proctor services (if applicable)

- Resolution of accusations of cheating on online tests (if applicable)

- Accommodations

## X.  Copyright and Intellectual Property

### Copyright Compliance

Faculty are expected to apply good faith effort to comply with Title 17, United States Code regarding copyright including the Technology, Education, and Copyright Harmonization Act (TEACH Act) as it pertains to distance classes. The TEACH Act facilitates the resource needs of distance education (within nonprofit educational institutions) with the rights of the copyright holders. In most cases it allows distance educators to use materials in a distance-learning environment without requiring the permission of the copyright owner.

A good summary resource regarding the TEACH Act is Distance Education and the TEACH Act from the American Library Association, available at http://www.ala.org/advocacy/copyright/teachact/distanceeducation. The text of the TEACH Act (17 USC § 110(2) is available at http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/17/110.

### Intellectual Property

JMU provides educational resources and services to assist staff and faculty in good faith assessment of their intellectual property and to encourage best practices. JMU policy 1107 and Copyright@JMU address the ownership of intellectual property of online courses.