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All Roads Lead to Online Teaching Excellence: An Alternative Route to Faculty Certification for Online Teaching

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New faculty who arrive at the University of Central Florida are very likely to be asked to teach at least one online ("W") or mixed-mode ("M") course. Realizing that effective teaching in these digital formats requires additional skills and knowledge that go beyond the traditional face-to-face classroom, UCF requires faculty to be certified in online teaching. Faculty at UCF have two avenues to obtain certification to develop and teach online or mixed-mode courses: our online teaching certification course IDL6543 or our alternative track for experienced faculty new to UCF called Online Faculty Readiness Assessment (OFRA). This assessment recognizes a faculty member's prior online teaching experience and ensures the incoming faculty has the skills and knowledge they need to be successful teaching online at UCF. This alternative approach directly contributes to UCF's strategic plan ("UCF Strategic Plan," 2017) by fast-tracking new faculty as certified online instructors (Strengthening Faculty) and increasing the number of online courses available to students (Increasing Student Access).

The Center for Distributed Learning has been certifying and assisting faculty with the design, development, and support of online and mixed-mode courses since 1996. To become certified, faculty must complete the award-winning 80-hour non-credit mixed-mode course, IDL6543. Interactive Distributed Learning (IDL6543) includes information regarding the technology skills, pedagogy, and logistics involved in teaching online at UCF. The course is offered three times a year and is lead by an instructional designer (ID) and a faculty member experienced in online teaching. Each faculty participant attending IDL6543 is also assigned an ID who will coach them through the design and development process. The course is in high demand and frequently has a waiting list.

As teaching online has become more common over the last two decades (McGee, Windes, & Torres, 2017), many faculty arrive at UCF with online teaching experience. Affordances need to be made to recognize the online teaching experience of newly arrived faculty. There is a delicate balance between honoring someone's prior experience and also ensuring that they have the skills and knowledge to be successful online instructors at UCF (Walters, Grover, Turner, & Alexander, 2017).

When a faculty member is selected to be an OFRA participant, they are assigned an ID who will develop an individualized Course Completion Plan for the participant. The individualized Course Completion Plan includes items that the faculty member needs to complete and may range from learning about UCF's processes and support of online courses to topics such as Copyright, and Accessibility, as well as one-on-one course-building support and guidance from their assigned ID.

As working with an OFRA candidate is not as common as working with faculty attending IDL6543, an online companion course has been created to assist IDs as they work with their OFRA participant. The companion course provides an overview of the OFRA process and lists all of the required activities and course-building assignments (e.g., course syllabus, course expectations, interactive activities) to ensure each faculty member demonstrates the necessary skills and knowledge to be a successful online instructor at UCF. As each OFRA participant

receives an individualized plan, the companion course also includes a wealth of information and resources that may be shared with the faculty member.

Having the OFRA process in place as an option to acknowledge a faculty member's prior experience has not only assisted the OFRA candidates, it has also opened up much needed seats in the IDL6543 course. The OFRA process not only acknowledges faculty member's online teaching experience, it provides them an individualized approach to gaining the knowledge and skills and the course development support and guidance they need at UCF.

There are several significant challenges associated with the OFRA process, including challenges for the ID, department chair, and faculty participant. The first challenge – approving faculty applications to participate in the OFRA process – arises as department chairs determine which of their faculty may be good candidates for OFRA certification. Determining which faculty members have the skills and knowledge that make participation in IDL6543 redundant requires acquiring and evaluating artifacts (syllabi, assignments, screen captures from previous online courses, online teaching awards) from possibly more than one institution and determining whether those artifacts demonstrate strong online teaching skills and knowledge. Even when an OFRA applicant has made available a large portfolio of artifacts, determining the level of skill and knowledge related to online pedagogy is not easy. The IDs who evaluate OFRA applications face a similar challenge: determining who meets the OFRA certification criteria and who does not. Another challenge lies in conveying to department chairs the distinction between OFRA and IDL6543. For IDs, an additional challenge involves developing a robust, individualized plan for each faculty member who qualifies for OFRA certification: each plan should clearly address any deficiencies as well as encourage strengths. Also, OFRA faculty have many demands on their time and making time to complete the tasks associated with this process can be tough. The ID has to create a relationship with the faculty member that promotes the importance of completing the OFRA process within the prescribed time frame.

Since 2010, 38 faculty members have earned online teaching certification through the OFRA process and, in this way, were able to immediately begin teaching in the online environment. To ensure that experienced faculty who are new to UCF have the skills and knowledge to teach in the online modality, CDL has developed the OFRA process. The OFRA certification process offers a timely, individualized approach to bringing up to top speed our newest faculty who have already invested significant time in developing their online teaching skills; during this process, the OFRA faculty receives a one-semester waiver to teach online without IDL or OFRA certification so they can begin teaching online immediately. Another benefit of the OFRA process is this: faculty who participate in this process relinquish a seat in IDL6543 that can then be assigned to another faculty who is less experienced in online teaching and will benefit from taking this course. By increasing the number of pathways to online teaching certification, student access to online courses at UCF has been enhanced and opportunities for success multiplied. For example, in Fall 2017, 46,801 students took a course in online (W), mixed-mode (M), reduced seat-time/video streaming (RV), or video streaming (V) modes—OFRA is an important part of this amazing expansion of student university access. The OFRA approach to online teaching certification is a vital part of CDL's commitment to faculty development and online teaching excellence.

McGee, P., Windes, D., & Torres, M. (2017). Experienced online instructors: Beliefs and preferred supports regarding online teaching. *Journal of Computing in Higher Education, 29*(2), 331-352. doi:10.1007/s12528-017-9140-6

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