

Study Guide for the Online Instructor Certification Assessment



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Introduction

From an instructor's perspective, there are two primary components to delivering a course via the Internet: technical and teaching. The technical component can be described simply as knowing what buttons to push in order to complete a particular task. In other words, the instructor should have a functional knowledge of the course management system (CMS) being used to deliver the course.

As important as the technical component is, the teaching – or pedagogical – component is even more important. What good are a bunch of “bells and whistles” if they do not accomplish the overall goal of effective instruction? One must understand why those buttons are being pushed and how each task facilitates and enhances the teaching and learning process.

The Prairie View A&M University administration has determined that a certification assessment will be required to ensure that faculty who are teaching – or intend to teach – online courses have a functional understanding of both components. To that end, the instructional designers here at PVAMU address those components while assisting university faculty with online course development and certification preparation.

While there is a plethora of documentation readily available concerning the technical component of online instruction, it is always important to re-emphasize the teaching component. This document is intended to be used as study guide for the pedagogical concepts and the rules and standards regarding online instruction specific to PVAMU.



Page Layout - PVAMU standards for homepage layout for online courses

1. Number of Icons
 - a) PVAMU has set a limit of nine icons on the course homepage. This limit was selected as a matter of effective web design. Because the home page is the portal to rest of the course, home page content should be easy to scan quickly. The page should not look too busy and it should not require the user to scroll in order to see all of the content.
 - b) Other pages may have more than nine icons. And we understand that scrolling is sometimes unavoidable in pages that contain a lot of course content. All we ask that designers/instructors use folders, learning modules, and the placement of other tools strategically to minimize scrolling as much as possible.
2. Colors
 - a) We encourage creativity in the use of colors as long as sound web design principles are followed. Colors with a neon effect should be avoided because these colors can be distracting and could violate accessibility rules for students with Americans with Disability Act (ADA) considerations.
 - b) The use of reds and green should be minimized because those with color blindness have issues with seeing these colors
3. Text
 - a) The color rules stated above in 2. a) and b) should be applied to text font colors, as well. Effective contrast should be used with font colors and page background colors. Studies have concluded that the most effective contrast is dark text against a light background.
 - b) Font sizes should be used thoughtfully. While there is no required range of font sizes, keep in mind that fonts should be large enough for the average reader to see clearly, but small enough to utilize page space effectively depending on their use.
 - c) Be sure to use proper "netiquette" (web etiquette) when it comes to capitalization. Remember that when you use all caps, you are "yelling" at the reader.
4. Selection Buttons – when adding content and modifying pages in eCourses, different selection buttons are utilized:
 - a) The selection button is called a radio button. In most cases, a set of radio buttons for a group of options indicates that only one of those options can be selected.
 - b) The selection button is called a check box. In most cases, a set of check boxes for a group of options indicates that more than one of those options can be selected.

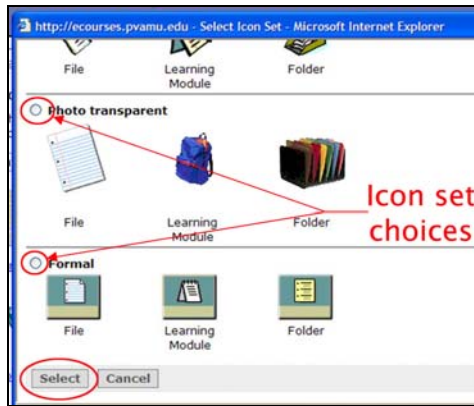
Managing Links – Links point to content and are made up of an icon and/or text

1. Working with Icons

- a) Built-In eCourses Icons – Icon sets that are already within the eCourses for instructor/designer use. They can be found by doing the following:
 - i. click the **Manage Course** button on the **Designer Tools** menu;
 - ii. click the **Course Content Icons** link from the **Manage Course** page;
 - iii. click the **Select New Icon Set** button



- iv. After clicking the **Select New Icon Set** button, the **Select Icon Set** window opens. This window shows a list of icon sets to choose from.



- v. Click the radio button for the desired icon set and then click the **Select** button.
Note: Changing the icon set changes all existing and future icons. To change individual icons, see “Custom Icons” below.

- vi. After returning to the **Course Content Icon** screen, click the **Apply** button

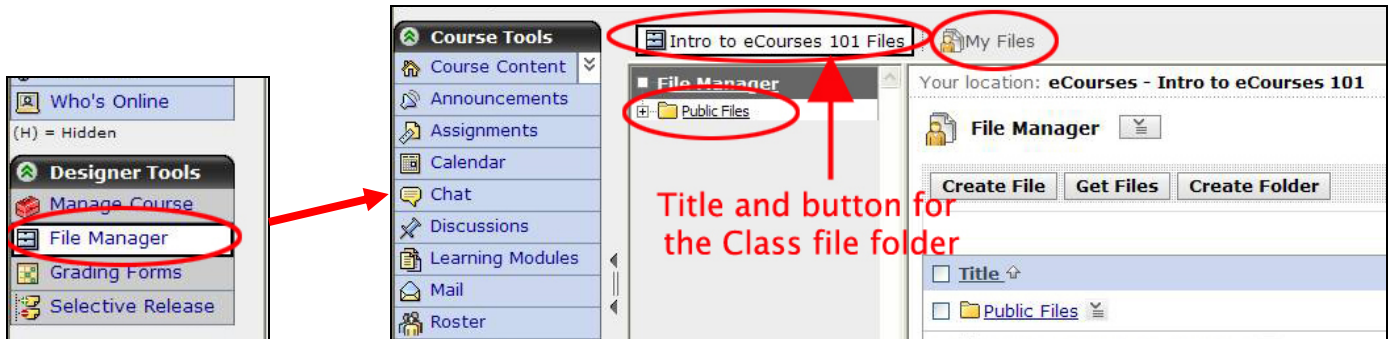
- b) Custom Icons – icons that are uploaded from outside of eCourses. The Instructors/designers can create sub-folder in the File Manager and upload graphics of their choosing to be used as icons for their course.

2. Icon Selection

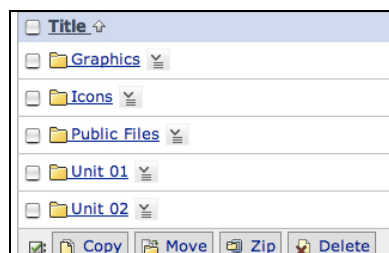
- a) We encourage creativity in the selection of icons, but as a matter of effective web page design and “user-friendliness” for the student, we ask that designers use icons that are appropriate to the subject matter and/or content of the page to which the icons point.
- b) eCourses icons are already sized appropriately. When using custom icons, as a general rule of thumb we suggest that the icon size be kept in the range of 100 x 100 pixels. Larger dimensions can shift the rest of the page in a way that unfavorably distorts the layout.

Managing Files and folders – The following outline describes the **Manage Files** control Panel in eCourses.

1. Default Folders - The **File Manager** area stores the content files for the course. Clicking the **File Manager** link from the **Designer Tools** menu accesses the **File Manager**. It has three default folders: My-Files and Class Files, and the Public Folder.

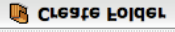


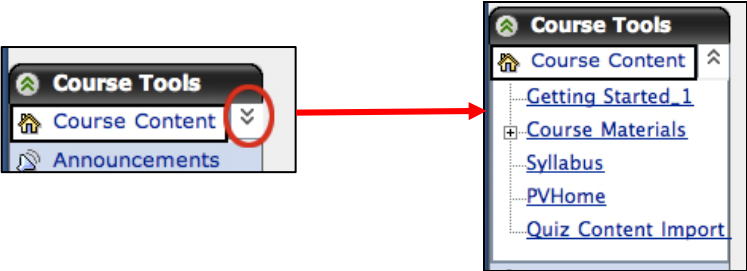
- a) **My Files** – this folder is accessible to all courses in which the user is enrolled. Instructors/designers can create and delete sub-folders in this area. They can also upload and download files to and from this folder. This folder can also be used to store files that will be used in multiple courses.
 - b) **Class Files** – contains content specifically for individual courses. This folder allows the instructor to organize content in a structured pattern that makes it easier to locate content. This and the **My-Files** folder, this area can not be accessed or seen by students.
 - c) **Public Files** – contains files that are used in the Course Preview.
2. Uploading and Downloading Files
 - a) Click the **Create File** button to create HTML files.
Note: the "Enable HTML Creator" button can be used to add text formatting and images without hand-coding HTML
 - b) Click the **Get Files** button to upload files from the the hard drive or removable storage.
 3. Creating Folders
 - a) Click the **Create Folder** button to create sub folders. As a rule of thumb, folders should be set up in a logical structure. For example, if the course is organized in units, contains graphics, and uses custom icons, the folder structure might be similar to the following:



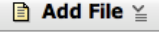
Folders, Files, and Learning Modules – These tools allow designers to organize content in a logical, structured pattern. The effective use of these tools, along with thoughtful design of course documents (PowerPoint files, .pdf documents, etc...) allow for the “Chunking” of course content so that students can more easily access and internalize information.

1. Creating Folders in the Course Content Area


The  button allows you to group course tools into subsets on the course Home Page to help you organize the elements in your course. Links to folders can appear on the *Course Content Menu*.



2. Files

The  button allows you to add or create pages of course content. Files of many formats can be uploaded (eg: .txt, .doc, .htm, .html, .xls, .ppt, .pdf, .jpg, and .gif).

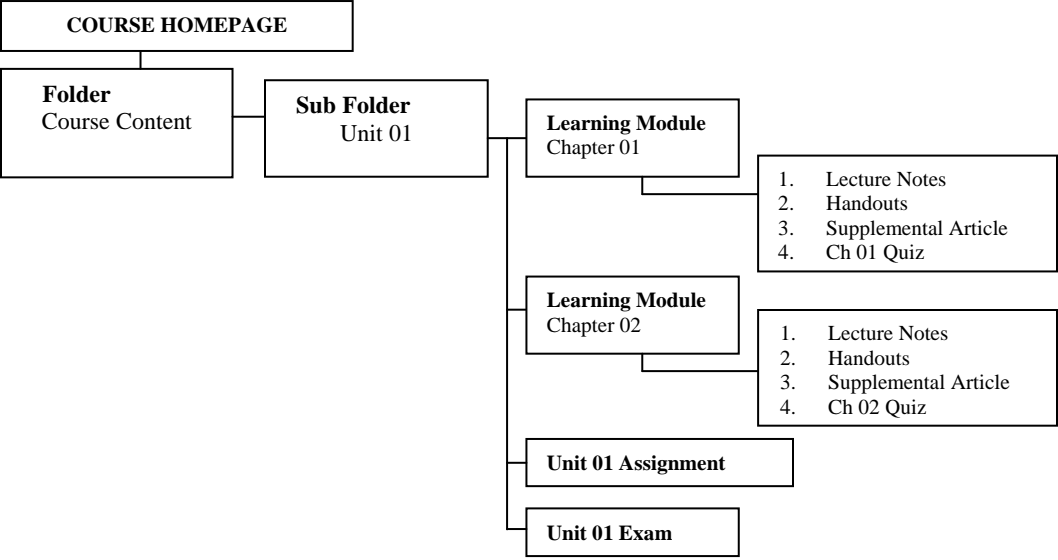
3. Learning Modules

- a) A **Learning Module** is created by organizing pages of course information into a **Table of Contents**. This provides a guide to the sequence of study for the course content. The hierarchical structure also makes it easier to find specific content.
- b) You organize the *Table of Contents* by adding headings and subheadings. You can then add content within this hierarchy by adding files of content. These files appear as links in the *Table of Contents*, which provides students easy access. When a student clicks a link, eCourses displays the content pages that you have added.
- c) Course files can be in most formats including: .rtf, .doc, .htm, .xls, .ppt, .pdf, .jpg, etc...
- d) Learning Modules can also contain links to selections from the  button.

4. Content Organization

A folder contains a subset of other content. That subset of content can consist of other folders, learning modules, files, and other tools like the Assignment and Quiz Tools.

An example of the typical structure of a unit of study is shown below:







eCourses Mail - *eCourses Mail* allows instructors, students, and teaching assistants to send, receive, reply, and forward mail messages to others in the course. You can also store drafts of mail messages, search your mail messages, and add mail folders. The outline below lists some of the properties and advantages of the eCourses Mail tool.

1. There are four default folders for each user. The default folders cannot be renamed or deleted:
 - a. *Inbox*: contains all received messages
 - b. *Sent Mail*: contains all sent messages
 - c. *Draft*: contains messages that you have composed but not sent
 - d. *Deleted Mail*: contains all messages

2. Advantages to using eCourses Mail
 - a. The address book is generated automatically
At PVAMU, the process of adding students to a eCourses course is tied to the University student and course information system. Therefore, a student is added to their course in eCourses when they successfully enroll in the course. All students in an eCourses course are automatically available in the Mail tool
 - b. eCourses Mail is self-contained
Only students, instructors, and TA's associated with a course have access to the mail for the course. This allows for easier organization of course-related mail. Instructors do not have to sort through non-course related or personal email to find student messages.
 - c. eCourses Mail is private
A message is only accessible to the sender and the recipient.

Note: Before Mail can be used, it must be added to the course by clicking the  **Manage Course** link from the Designer Tools menu and then clicking the  **Tools** button.





eCourses Chat and Whiteboard - *Chat* allows instructors, students, and teaching assistants to have real-time conversations. There is a default chat room called "Common Room" and a default Whiteboard area. The Whiteboard area allows for the realtime sharing of images. The outline below lists some of the features of the eCourses Chat tool.

Once participants (instructors, students, and teaching assistants) enter a chat room, they can:

1. send a message to everyone in the room
2. send a private message to someone in the room
3. activate the entry chime

Instructors have the ability to:

1. add Chat and Whiteboard rooms
2. modify Chat room names
3. view Chat room logs

Note: Before Mail can be used, it must be added to the course by clicking the  [Manage Course](#) link from the Designer Tools menu and then clicking the  [Tools](#) button.



Planning Discussions – The following outline lists some strategies and considerations when planning to incorporate discussion in your online course.

5. Determining the Learning Outcomes of Discussions
 - a) Identify Outcomes – What do you want the students to learn from this discussion? Will the discussion be graded? Is the discussion meant to encourage more social interaction?
 - b) Measuring Outcomes – What criteria will you use to evaluate students' discussion postings? It is important to state what you expect from participants in a graded discussion. You should try to avoid general statements that can be misinterpreted by the students. Clear, concise directions are the key to eliciting the kind of interaction you are seeking.
 - c) Behavior Guidelines – To help avoid inappropriate postings, whether in format or in content, be sure to define and model the type of posts you want to see on the discussion board. Explicitly instruct students to use appropriate grammar, to not use slang or expletives (unless the course subject matter calls for it), to use proper "netiquette" and to stay on-topic.
6. Types of Discussion Topics
 - a) Threaded - Use this topic type for a structured discussion, or when the discussion might take different directions. In threaded topics only message subjects are displayed on the main screen. All replies to the same message are grouped together, creating message threads. Students should be explicitly directed to use the "reply" feature to stay on the discussion thread.
 - b) Blogs - Use this topic type for a more casual discussion, or when you want students to be able to quickly see all messages. In blog (web log) topics, messages are displayed on the main screen as a chronological series of entries. Participants can comment on messages; comments appear on a separate screen
 - c) Journals - Journal topics can be created to give each student a place for their writing samples or to record their thoughts on course topics or lectures. Journals can be private (for student and instructor only) or public (accessible by the class).




Discussion Topics – The following outline lists some strategies and suggestions when creating discussion topics for your online course.

7. Maximizing Student Participation
 - a) **Setting the Tone** – Instructions and goals should be stated clearly. Students should know if and when discussions will be led, moderated, or occasionally visited by the instructor; and students should know if and when discussions will be student-led. Instructors should also model the behavior they expect the students to display. For example, instructors should be sure to follow the rules of netiquette.
 - b) **Building Communities Through Discussion** – Some courses may not *seem* to lend themselves to discussion, but with the proper consideration, effective discussion can be used in any course. In activity-centered courses like laboratory-based or drafting courses, a “Frequently Asked Questions” (FAQ) discussion can be used to provide quick access to common questions. Postings can be anonymous, so that students will be encouraged to post questions that they might be otherwise too embarrassed to ask. Blogs can also be used to encourage social interaction. The more students interact on a social level, the more likely they are to collaborate in the academic aspects of the course.
8. Discussions as Teaching and Learning Tools
 - a) **Grading Discussion** – In order to ensure student participation, some discussions should be required. The best way to ensure participation in required discussions is to grade them. Be explicit about the criteria that will be used in grading discussions. Before assigning the first graded discussion, however, it might be a good idea to create an ungraded discussion so that students can become familiar with the process and your expectations.
 - b) **Crafting Effective Postings** – Depending on the course or the current subject matter, the instructor’s initial posting should be worded in a way that requires the student to engage in deep thought or perform a certain amount of research in order to post the desired type of reply. For example, instead of asking a student to simply list a set of items, you could ask them to describe how those items can be used in the context of the course’s subject matter.



Assignments - Instructor feedback is a key component in any course, whether it is feedback on an assignment or assessment, or feedback meant to encourage or challenge students to go further in researching or analyzing their work. The Assignment tool provides a central location for instructors to provide such feedback. The following outlines how the Assignment tool can be used to provide feedback on assignments submitted through eCourses. It also compares the use of the Assignment tool to other forms of feedback.

9. Using the Assignment Dropbox

- a) Go to the **Teach** tab and click the **Assignment Dropbox** link from the **Instructor Tools** area, and click the **Submitted** tab. Next, click the title of the assignment you are grading. From this page you can download or read the assignment and then add a grade and comments.
- b) After downloading and grading the assignment, use the  button to upload a file into the assignment page that student can later download and/or view online. This file could be a corrected version of the student's submission with added feedback.

Note: *The corrected version of the file, along with any other instructor comments, is transmitted only to the student the student who submitted the assignment.*

10. Using Email and Discussion

- a) Email can be used in a similar fashion as the Assignment tool. Like the assignment tool, the communication is private between the instructor and the student. However, the Assignment tool adds the convenience of conducting the communication, course submission, and grading information all in one location.
- b) Discussion does not provide the type of private communication that the Email and Assignment tools provide. Discussion can, however, be useful for feedback that might be restricted to students participating in group assignments. It can also be useful for general feedback intended for the entire class.

NOTE: For quizzes and assignments, the best way to ensure that they are configured the way you intend is to view them as a student. The "Student View" tab provides a view from a student's perspective for all student eCourses elements and allows instructors and designers to participate in the course as a "demo" student.



Quizzes – In addition to the content, providing feedback and security are two of the most important considerations when creating and administering quizzes and other assessments. The outline below lists methods considerations when administering assessments through eCourses.

1. Feedback and Comments

- c) Providing feedback is one of the most effective ways to maximize student learning for quizzes and other assessments. When students give incorrect responses, it is important for them to be corrected. In some cases, it is even more effective to direct them to where the correct answer can be found as opposed to just listing the correct answers. The eCourses Quiz tool allows instructors to provide this kind of feedback after assessments have been completed and submitted.
- d) With some assessments, security and/or time are premium concerns. In those instances, instructors may need to limit the amount of feedback they provide. However, for assessments where these issues are not as vital, instructors have the ability to add feedback and general comments to students after quizzes and exams.
- e) Feedback and comments are added by accessing the Quiz Editor and selecting the question title. Selecting the question title opens a screen that allows for the modifications of individual questions.

2. Results Display – eCourses provides several options that control students' ability to view feedback:

- a) Student Score: control which quiz attempt (if multiple attempts are allowed) will be used as the students' grade.
- b) Student score release contains settings that allow students to review their submitted quiz and quiz scores.
- c) Student Results display provides a list of options that controls whether or not students can see feedback or comments



Grading Assessments and Security Options – Quizzes, exams, and other assessments can be graded automatically or manually, depending on the type of questions. There are also controls methods of maximizing security on these instruments.

1. Grading Quizzes

a) The types of quizzes that can be graded automatically are:

- i. Multiple Choice
- ii. Matching
- iii. True/False

b) The types of quizzes that should be graded manually are:

- i. Short Answer
- ii. Essay

Note: Short answer can be graded automatically by using keywords or phrases. It is important to note that this method requires words to be spelled and phrases to be entered in exactly the same way as the instructor specifies. Misspellings and rearrangement of words will be interpreted as incorrect responses when graded automatically.

2. Security Options and Considerations

a) Proctoring – The only way to ensure that students do not collaborate on secure assessments is to have them administered in a proctored environment. In a distance-education environment, where students may be spread out among different geographical regions, it would be necessary for the instructor and student to cooperate to identify a site that the instructor is confident will provide secure proctoring.

b) Editing Quiz Settings – eCourses provides tools that can be used to minimize collaboration or other forms of cheating. Question and answer display can be randomized; a large test bank can be used in conjunction with collaboration to minimize the likelihood that students will see the same questions in the same order; questions can be presented one at a time as opposed to making all of the questions visible at once; and a strict time limit can be set and enforced.

c) The Respondus LockDown Browser – Respondus is tool for creating and managing exams that can be printed to paper or published directly to Blackboard, WebCT, eCollege, ANGEL and other eLearning systems. The LockDown Browser is a custom browser that locks down the testing environment within eCourses. Students are locked into the assessment and are unable to print, copy, go to another URL, or access other applications.



Managing Students – There are many options available in the **Grade Book** area of eCourses. The eCourses administrator controls how many of those options are available to designers and instructors. The controls that are granted to designers and instructors depend on University rules regarding the use of eCourses. The outline below lists some considerations, procedures, and university rules relating to the **Grade Book**.

1. Adding Students

- a) Here at PVAMU, it is a rule that instructors can not add or remove students to eCourses courses. eCourses is tied to the University Student Information System so that the addition of students is an automated process that occurs when a student registers for courses.
- b) Instructors can, however, deny a student access to course content if the need arises.

2. Using the **Grade Book** to Calculate Grades

- a) The eCourses **Grade Book** does NOT provide a function or column that will automatically calculate and display cumulative grades.
- b) The **Grade Book** does, however, allow for the creation of a calculated column. The instructor can manually customize this column to perform a limited number of mathematical functions based on data entered in other parts of the table.
- c) Creative customization may allow instructors to create their own columns to calculate and convert scores to letter grades. However, it is important to note that the column works best with simple adding functions. It does not lend itself easily to dealing with varying weights and scoring “curves” that are often used in student grading.

3. Exporting Student Records

A potentially more effective way to calculate grades is to export the **Grade Book** to a spreadsheet format. Spreadsheets can more easily apply any curves, weights, and other complex functions that may be involved in calculating grades.



Technical Support Considerations – With any type of technology, technical issues will sometimes arise. eCourses is no exception. There will be times when students and/or faculty are faced with technical issues that they cannot resolve on their own.

Here at PVAMU, there is a protocol that we follow to address those types of issues:

1. Student Technical Issues

- a. For eCourses login issues, students should contact the University Helpdesk at 936-261-2525 or the toll-free number 1-877-241-1752. The helpdesk will confirm or re-set the student login information as necessary.
- b. For eCourses technical issues other than logging in, students should take the following steps in order:
 - i. Contact the instructor. Students sometimes confuse questions about content and design with technical problems. For this reason, we ask them to check with their instructor first to find out if their issue is something that the instructor can resolve;
 - ii. If it is a issue that the instructor cannot resolve, the student can then be referred the Office of Distance Learning at 936-261-3290 or 936-261-3283

2. Instructor Technical Issues

- a. For eCourses login issues, we ask that instructors confirm that their PantherTracks login credentials are working.
- b. If the instructor's PantherTracks login credentials are working but they still cannot login to eCourses, they should call the Office of Distance Learning at 936-261-3290 or 936-261-3283
- c. For all other technical issues, faculty and staff should call the Office of Distance Learning.

Conclusion

Once again, this document concentrates on the pedagogical concepts of online instruction and the rules and standards specific to PVAMU regarding our online courses. If you need any technical – or “how-to” documentation or assistance, or if you would like to expand upon the information discussed in this study guide, please contact the PVAMU Office of Distance Learning at 936-261-2525 or 936-261-3283.

We hope that this study guide assists you in the successful completion of the PVAMU Certification Assessment.