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Introducing the COTE Framework: A Practical Guide for Faculty

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Abstract

The Compass of Online Teaching Excellence (COTE) Framework is a structured, research-based resource developed by Hostos EdTech to enhance online course quality, foster student engagement, and support inclusive learning environments. It provides faculty with practical tools and checklists aligned with institutional policies and best pedagogical practices, integrating Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, accessibility standards, and evolving modalities such as hybrid, HyFlex, and AI-enhanced learning. The framework is structured around four Keystones—Course Structure, Technology Integration, Student Engagement, and Community Building—each reinforced by Omni Elements that ensure adaptability and inclusivity. COTE also includes guidance on AI usage, emphasizing academic integrity while leveraging technology for improved learning experiences. As a pilot initiative, its implementation is being assessed through faculty adoption rates, student engagement, and course quality improvements, with plans for integration into institutional teaching certification programs.

Keywords: Online Teaching Framework; Course Quality; Student Engagement; Universal Design for Learning (UDL); Accessibility in Online Learning; AI in Education; Academic Integrity and AI; Faculty Development; Online Course Design; Inclusive Online Learning.

Resumen

El Compás de Excelencia en la Enseñanza en Línea (COTE por sus siglas en inglés) es un recurso estructurado y basado en la investigación, desarrollado por Hostos EdTech, para mejorar la calidad de los cursos en línea, fomentar la participación estudiantil y fortalecer entornos de aprendizaje inclusivos. Proporciona a los docentes herramientas prácticas y rúbricas de verificación alineadas con las políticas institucionales y las mejores prácticas pedagógicas, integrando principios de Diseño Universal para el Aprendizaje (UDL por sus siglas en inglés), estándares de accesibilidad y modalidades emergentes como el aprendizaje híbrido, HyFlexy el uso de inteligencia artificial (IA) en la enseñanza. El compás está organizado en torno a cuatro pilares fundamentales: Estructura del Curso, Integración Tecnológica, Participación Estudiantil y Creación de Comunidad, cada uno respaldado por Elementos Omnipresentes que garantizan su adaptabilidad e inclusividad. Además, COTE ofrece orientación sobre el uso de IA, destacando la importancia de la integridad académica al tiempo que aprovecha la tecnología para mejorar la experiencia de aprendizaje. Como una iniciativa piloto, su implementación está siendo evaluada a través de la adopción por parte del profesorado, la participación estudiantil y la mejora de la calidad de los cursos, con planes de integración en los programas institucionales de certificación docente.

Palabras Claves: Marco de enseñanza en línea; Calidad del curso; Participación estudiantil; Diseño Universal para el Aprendizaje (UDL); Accesibilidad en el aprendizaje en línea; IA en la educación; Integridad académica e IA; Desarrollo del profesorado; Diseño de cursos en línea; Aprendizaje en línea inclusivo.

Introduction

The Compass of Online Teaching Excellence (COTE) Framework is a structured, research-based resource designed to help faculty enhance online course quality, foster student engagement, and create inclusive learning environments. Developed by Hostos EdTech, COTE provides practical, just-in-time tools that support instructors in assessing and refining their courses. This review examines how the COTE framework aligns institutional policies with industry best practices, integrates Universal Design for Learning (UDL) for accessibility, adapts to evolving modalities (hybrid, HyFlex, AI-enhanced learning), and provides guidance on AI usage with academic integrity.

COTE Explained

COTE is a multi-dimensional framework built around four keystones—Course Structure, Technology Integration, Student Engagement, and Community Building—which define the essential elements of effective online teaching (Figure 1). These keystones are further supported by ubiquitous elements called Omni Elements—Accessibility, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Evaluation, and Resources— flexible tools that make each Keystone more inclusive, resilient, and responsive to diverse student needs (Hostos Community College, n.d.).

Keystones

The Course Structure Keystone guides the organization and flow of learning experiences, promoting coherence and effectiveness. The Technology Integration Keystone supports faculty in selecting and implementing effective technologies to promote collaboration, foster engagement, and strengthen student retention. The Student Engagement Keystone promotes active participation and meaningful interactions to cultivate a dynamic learning environment.

The Community Building Keystone highlights strategies that enrich the educational journey by fostering a sense of community through collaboration and shared experiences.

Omni Elements

The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Omni Element promotes inclusive teaching strategies that accommodate diverse learning styles and abilities. The Accessibility Omni Element ensures that all course materials and activities are accessible to every student, removing barriers to learning. The Evaluation Omni Element emphasizes continuous assessment and feedback to measure and enhance the achievement of course goals. The Resources Omni Element provides essential academic resources and technical support to facilitate a comprehensive learning experience.

Checklists

The Keystone and Omni elements are organized as checklists. Each Keystone points to a set of checklists that provides practical guidelines, strategies, Omni elements pertaining to each topic and resources for implementation (Hostos Community College, n.d.).

Course Structure Keystone Checklists

- Course Overview & Objectives
- Assessment Strategies & Methods
- Course Schedule & Pacing
- Modular Course Organization

Technology Integration Keystone Checklists

- Optimized LMS Experience

- Purposeful Multimedia Usage
- Ethical Use of AI
- Privacy & Security Awareness

Student Engagement Keystone

- Communication Channels
- Feedback to and from Students
- Active Learning Opportunities
- Regular & Substantive Interaction (RSI) Statement

Community Building Keystone

- Social Presence
- Cognitive Presence
- Teaching Presence
- Aligning Institutional Policies with Best Pedagogical Practices

Figure 1

COTE Logo

A standout feature of COTE is its deliberate bridging of institutional policy mandates and proven best practice frameworks. Many universities enforce policies or regulations in online education – for example, ADA guidelines require accessible content, RSI rules ensure instructor-student engagement for credit-bearing online courses, and some have specific online engagement policies (like whether instructors can require webcams). COTE weaves these requirements into its quality checklist so that meeting them is part of the course design process rather than an afterthought. In practice, this means an instructor using COTE will be prompted to add alt-text for images, caption videos, schedule regular instructor interactions, and respect student privacy in video sessions – all as an integrated aspect of good course design.

COTE's development was informed by established online course quality rubrics and draws on frameworks such as the California State University (CSU) and CSU Chico guidelines for online learning, Quality Matters, the IDEAS Framework for Teaching Online, and the Online SUNY Course Quality Review (OSCQR) scorecard, a widely recognized tool for improving learner-centered course quality adopted by the Online Learning Consortium (OLC). In addition, COTE heavily relies on the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework developed by CAST. These renowned frameworks encapsulate research-based best practices for online courses – from clear organization and aligned objectives to active learning and accessibility.

In effect, COTE serves as a "translator" between institutional rules and pedagogy standards: an instructor following COTE's checklist is simultaneously checking off institutional policy compliance and adhering to best-practice design principles drawn from afore-mentioned frameworks. This alignment is important because it underscores that many compliance requirements are themselves rooted in good pedagogy. Regular and Substantive Interaction

(RSI), for instance, is not just a federal mandate for distance education but also is broadly seen as a hallmark of effective online teaching (The Ohio State University, n.d.). Decades of research show that frequent, meaningful instructor-student interaction improves understanding and student success in online environments.

Likewise, ADA compliance overlaps with universal design practices that benefit all learners, not only those with disabilities. COTE reinforces the idea that meeting institutional policies can directly enhance course quality. As the SUNY OSCQR project states, the goal is to ensure online courses meet quality design and accessibility standards while reflecting campus guidelines and effective practices (OSCQR, n.d.). In summary, COTE effectively synchronizes the "must-do" of institutional rules with the "should-do" of pedagogical best practices, providing faculty a one-stop framework to satisfy both.

Integrating UDL Principles and Student-Centered Design

At the heart of COTE, there is a strong commitment to Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and inclusive, student-centered teaching. UDL is a framework developed by CAST that guides educators in designing courses usable for the broadest range of learners by providing multiple ways for students to engage with content, represent knowledge, and express their learning (CAST, 2024).

COTE explicitly emphasizes UDL principles throughout via Omni elements that are present in every keystone and provide context-based guidelines for UDL-enhanced course design. In practical terms, COTE's checklists and guides encourage instructors to present content in various formats (text, video, audio, visuals) and to allow students different options to participate and demonstrate understanding in each step of the course design process.

Accessibility in the COTE framework goes beyond minimum accessibility compliance and actively promotes student-centered learning. Accessibility is not treated as a mere checklist item but as a design mindset. For example, in the Course Overview & Objectives Checklist, faculty are directed to use the structured or unstructured lists for presenting course objectives following the ADA compliance standards. UDL and Accessibility focus means courses are designed to be flexible and cater to a variety of needs from the outset, which improves the learning experience for everyone – students with disabilities, English language learners, students with different learning styles, etc.

Moreover, COTE aligns with other student-centered pedagogical frameworks beyond UDL. Its four keystones – Course Structure, Technology Integration, Student Engagement, and Community Building – mirror core aspects of quality identified in the research. For instance, fostering student engagement and community is a major theme in COTE, which resonates with the Community of Inquiry model's emphasis on social presence and active learning in online settings (Community of Inquiry, n.d.). COTE's guidance to use interactive elements, discussions, and collaborative projects supports the best practice of active and collaborative learning, which is shown to increase student engagement and improve outcomes. Likewise, the continuous evaluation component (one of the Omni Elements) suggests that instructors should regularly gather feedback and refine their courses, aligning with the iterative improvement philosophy of frameworks like OSCQR that call for courses to be "regularly and systematically reviewed, refreshed, and improved" (OSCQR, n.d.).

COTE's integration of UDL and related design principles ensures that the framework not only meets accessibility standards but actively cultivates an inclusive, student-centered

environment where diverse learners can thrive. This approach reflects a synthesis of the best thinking in instructional design – combining the broad reach of UDL for accessibility and diversity with the targeted checkpoints of quality rubrics – to enhance learning for all students.

Adapting to Evolving Modalities: Hybrid, HyFlex, and AI-Enhanced Learning

Multi-Modal Application

Another strength of the COTE framework is its adaptability to various teaching modalities and emerging technologies. While COTE is positioned as an online teaching excellence tool, it was built to be flexible across diverse instructional settings and to keep pace with emerging educational technologies. This means the same core principles can guide course design not just for fully online classes, but also for hybrid and HyFlex models where face-to-face and online elements are blended. The four keystones of COTE are broad enough to apply in any modality: a hybrid or HyFlex course also needs clear course structure, effective technology integration for both in-person and remote students, active student engagement strategies, and community building to unite learners, whether they are in a classroom or on Zoom.

In fact, research on HyFlex (hybrid-flexible) teaching suggests that success in these complex environments depends less on the specific format and more on implementing sound pedagogy consistently. High-quality HyFlex courses require “multimodal learning” and “high levels of interaction”, which are essentially the same pedagogical principles that benefit any online class (NCSU, n.d.). Student success is tied to instructors using those key principles rather than the delivery mode itself (NCSU, n.d.). COTE’s design directly supports this flexibility; by stressing multimodal content delivery (via UDL) and robust interaction (via engagement and community guidelines), it prepares instructors to excel whether their course is fully online,

blended, or HyFlex. For example, an instructor designing a HyFlex course with COTE's guidance would ensure the LMS site is well-organized for online students (Course Structure), use classroom technology to include remote participants (Technology Integration), plan activities that involve both in-person and online learners (Student Engagement), and establish class norms and introductions to create one community among all students (Community Building). These align with known HyFlex best practices such as offering equivalent learning experiences for all participation modes and maintaining a strong instructor presence to tie groups together (CTL Columbia University, n.d.). COTE doesn't explicitly mention "HyFlex," but its adaptable principles make it a useful compass for such modality-blending designs.

Guidance on AI Usage: Balancing Innovation with Integrity

One of the timely features of COTE is its inclusion of structured guidance for AI usage in teaching, coupled with a strong emphasis on academic integrity and ethics. As AI tools (such as generative AI for content creation, automated feedback systems, or AI tutoring assistants) become more prevalent in education, instructors face the challenge of using these tools to improve learning while preventing misuse (e.g. plagiarism or over-reliance by students). This indicates that COTE likely offers specific recommendations or checklists for AI – such as disclosing AI assistance, avoiding AI that replaces essential student skills practice, and ensuring AI-generated content is accessible and unbiased.

Many institutions and teaching centers now urge faculty to set clear policies on AI use in their syllabus and assignments. For instance, Harvard's Office of Academic Integrity suggests providing explicit AI guidelines to students (defining what AI tools can or cannot be used for) and including an ethical AI use statement that reinforces academic honesty while encouraging

innovative use within bounds (Harvard College Office of Academic Integrity and Student Conduct, n.d.)

COTE's framework likely echoes such steps. Building on the Hostos "New Syllabus Templates Address Policies for Using Artificial Intelligence," it advises instructors to communicate to students when AI assistance is permissible, require students to document or cite any AI-generated help (to maintain transparency), and design assessments that minimize academic dishonesty (for example, emphasizing personalized or creative tasks that AI can't easily complete alone) (Hostos Community College, n.d.). In short, COTE helps faculty harness AI as a supportive tool rather than a shortcut.

Upholding academic integrity in the age of AI is a delicate balance. COTE's stance is to be proactive; rather than advocating banning AI outright, it promotes responsible integration. This means using AI in ways that enhance learning (e.g. providing instant formative feedback via an AI tutor, or using AI to generate diverse practice problems), but also establishing guardrails. Ethical considerations highlighted in broader discussions include addressing AI biases, protecting student data privacy, and keeping "humans in the loop" for critical decisions (University of North Florida, n.d.)

While COTE is a course design framework (not a policy document), its inclusion of AI ethics reminds instructors to consider these factors. COTE does not prescribe the use of AI in a course, but it offers practical tips to consider. For example, an instructor might use an AI-driven discussion prompt generator, but COTE would prompt them to monitor the outputs for appropriateness and to guide students in critically evaluating AI contributions. This structured yet cautious approach aligns with frameworks like the World Economic Forum's AI Education

Principles, which advocate harnessing AI's benefits while ensuring a "balanced, ethical, and inclusive" implementation (World Economic Forum, 2024).

In summary, COTE's core principles scale across online, hybrid, and HyFlex formats, and its forward-looking guidance on AI indicates a proactive stance on evolving teaching modalities. This adaptability ensures that faculty can rely on COTE as a compass not just for current best practices but also for navigating future innovations in digital pedagogy.

Pilot Implementation and Data Collection Plan

To translate the COTE framework from concept to practice, a structured pilot implementation has been launched at Hostos Community College. This pilot is organized into four key phases—Orientation, Self-Evaluation, Course Refinement, and Formal Evaluation—each designed to support faculty adoption while gathering meaningful data on the framework's impact.

Orientation Phase

Participating faculty are introduced to the COTE framework through workshops and training sessions. In this phase, instructors receive the COTE checklists and guidelines, along with clear expectations for the pilot. The goal is to establish a common understanding of the framework's components (the four Keystones and Omni Elements) and to prepare faculty to apply COTE in their courses. This phase is coordinated with the department chairs.

Self-Evaluation Phase

Faculty then apply the COTE framework to analyze and evaluate their own online courses. Using the provided checklists (still in development), instructors conduct a thorough self-

audit of their course structure, technology integration, student engagement strategies, and community-building activities. Deployed either through the Learning Management System (LMS), or an alternative online platform, the COTE checklists will be used for the purpose of recording the self-assessment. Their rubrics will be aligned with a COTE Keystone with the integrated Omni Elements. Each rubric will consist of essential elements that must be met and recommended elements that can contribute to the total score. The rubrics' levels of achievements are descriptive: "Present" if the criterion is met and "Needs Work" if the criterion is not met. The overall score has three levels of achievement: "Above & Beyond," "Meets Expectations," and "Needs Work."

This practice aligns with established quality assurance models in online education, where faculty first conduct a self-review and then receive "specific and constructive feedback" through a collaborative peer review process to inform course improvement (Quality Matters, n.d.). The self-evaluation helps faculty identify strengths and areas for improvement in alignment with COTE's standards.

The self-assessment rubrics establish a baseline measure of course quality against which changes can be measured. Faculty reflections and noted gaps during this phase are recorded as qualitative data, providing insight into common challenges and support needs. The platform used for self-assessment will retain data for the analysis done by EdTech.

Course Refinement Phase

Guided by the findings of the self-evaluation, faculty undertake targeted course revisions and enhancements. In this phase, instructors implement improvements based on COTE recommendations—for example, reorganizing course content for clearer structure, integrating

new technological tools or interactive elements, enriching student engagement through active learning activities, and bolstering community presence via regular communication or collaborative assignments. Hostos EdTech staff provide support and resources during this phase to assist with technical adjustments and pedagogical strategies. The Course Refinement Phase may be iterative, with instructors making changes and consulting the COTE checklist repeatedly to ensure all criteria are met. By the end of this phase, the participating courses should more fully embody the COTE principles, setting the stage for evaluating their impact.

Formal Evaluation Phase

Once course improvements are in place, the pilot enters a formal evaluation stage to assess outcomes. This phase involves the Educational Technology Leadership Council (ETLC), an advisory body composed of faculty representatives from each academic department and the library, with EdTech staff participating in an advisory capacity. Two trained members of the ETLC independently evaluate the same course using the same rubric criteria that faculty used in the self-assessment process (see the *Self-Evaluation Phase* section above). The ETLC evaluators offer an external peer perspective on the course's quality, ensuring that the review is objective and comprehensive. By design, this dual-review process provides both personal insight and impartial critique. The results of the ETLC evaluations are then aggregated into a summary rubric, which is shared with the instructor as formal feedback. Compared with the instructor's self-assessment, this consolidated report highlights agreements and discrepancies between the instructor's own evaluation and the external reviewers' findings, offering clear guidance on specific improvements. Such a multi-source evaluation approach not only validates the instructor's reflections but also introduces peer feedback to reveal any blind spots in the course

design – for example, an external reviewer can often spot issues an author might miss, since "familiarity with [one's] design choices can obscure areas that may be unclear or challenging for students" (Indiana University, 2023). Overall, the faculty members receive a detailed, evidence-based evaluation of their course, combining their own perspective with expert peer reviewers' insights.

Data Interpretation and Opportunities to Improve Feedback Processes

Based on the rubric-based evaluations, the data interpretation stage will explore tracking of broader institutional key performance indicators (KPIs) to measure the impact of COTE-aligned course design on student success. At Hostos, the Office of Institutional Effectiveness, Research, and Assessment (OIERA) oversees the research and implementation of student retention rates, student engagement levels, and course quality ratings; these KPIs will be potentially used to assess the effectiveness of COTE-certified courses. Data for these indicators will be drawn from multiple sources: Learning Management System (LMS) analytics (e.g. login frequency, participation statistics, and assignment submission rates) and course evaluation surveys (student ratings and comments on the course's quality and instructional effectiveness). By examining these data alongside the rubric evaluations, the Formal Evaluation Phase connects course design quality with tangible student outcomes. For instance, a course that scores highly on the COTE rubric's engagement and structure criteria might also show stronger LMS participation metrics and improved student satisfaction scores in course evaluations. Tracking these institutional metrics provides a macro-level view of effectiveness beyond the design checklist, ensuring that improvements guided by COTE are translating into measurable gains in student retention, engagement, and overall learning experience. This ideal two-pronged evaluation strategy – combining detailed course-level reviews with longitudinal institutional data – offers a

holistic assessment of each course. It not only verifies that the course meets the COTE Framework standards but also assesses how those design enhancements contribute to broader academic success, thereby closing the feedback loop for continuous improvement in online teaching excellence.

This phased pilot plan not only provides structured support for faculty participants but also generates empirical evidence to validate COTE's effectiveness. Detailed feedback from the participating instructors is gathered at each stage, offering practical insights into what aspects of the framework work well and what might need adjustment. Tracking KPIs in partnership with OIERA lends applicability and precision to the evaluation: measures such as improved student retention, higher student engagement, and enhanced course quality ratings (as reported by students) will demonstrate the framework's impact in measurable terms. The involvement of OIERA also means that the data from this pilot can be confidently used for institutional analysis and decision-making.

In sum, the pilot implementation and data collection plan establish a cycle of continuous feedback and assessment, ensuring that COTE's deployment is closely monitored and grounded in evidence. This evidence-based approach lays the groundwork for scaling effective practices and informs stakeholders about the tangible benefits of investing in online teaching excellence initiatives.

Areas for Future Refinement and Exploration

As the pilot progresses and initial results are analyzed, several avenues for further refinement of the COTE framework and its broader institutional integration have emerged. Ensuring that COTE remains a dynamic, relevant resource will require ongoing attention to

feedback, evolving needs, and strategic alignment with college priorities. Key areas for future exploration include:

Continuous Improvement of the COTE Framework

Data and feedback from the pilot will be used to iteratively refine COTE's checklists and guidelines. Elements of the framework may be adjusted to address any shortcomings revealed during the pilot. For example, if faculty feedback indicates that certain checklist items were unclear or too time-consuming, those can be clarified or modified. Likewise, if the pilot uncovers discipline-specific needs (such as unique online teaching strategies for STEM vs. humanities courses), the framework can be expanded or tailored with discipline-specific examples and recommendations. COTE's guidance on emerging issues—particularly around AI integration in teaching—will also be regularly updated. As new educational technologies and digital pedagogies evolve, the framework should incorporate those innovations (always balanced with considerations of academic integrity and inclusivity). This commitment to continuous improvement will keep COTE at the cutting edge of online teaching practice and ensure it remains a relevant tool for faculty development.

Integration into Institutional Programs and Policy

A promising direction is the incorporation of COTE into Hostos's formal faculty development and certification programs. Efforts are already underway to embed COTE checklists into the college's online teaching certification process for faculty. In doing so, COTE's principles will become a standard part of training for any instructor learning to teach online at Hostos. This integration will help standardize quality online teaching practices across

the institution, as every certified online instructor will be acquainted with COTE's expectations around course design, engagement, and accessibility.

By offering practical tools that can be applied at both the course and program levels, COTE supports consistent, high-quality teaching practices and ongoing faculty growth. Its integration into training contexts promotes a culture of reflection and continuous improvement. Sharing the framework and pilot outcomes with the broader CUNY community and at academic conferences will further position Hostos as a leader in online teaching excellence and create opportunities for collaboration to continue enhancing the framework.

Ongoing Assessment and Strategic Alignment

The partnership with the Office of Institutional Effectiveness, Research, and Assessment (OIERA) is critical not only for the pilot's data collection but also for translating findings into strategic planning. As robust data on student outcomes and course quality become available, these insights will help guide institutional decision-making. For example, if the COTE pilot demonstrates a significant increase in online course retention and student satisfaction, opportunities may emerge to scale the framework to all online courses, allocate resources for broader faculty training, or integrate COTE-based metrics into the college's strategic plan.

In this way, COTE serves as a vehicle to advance strategic goals such as improving student success, enhancing teaching effectiveness, and fostering innovation in pedagogy. The collaboration with OIERA ensures that any improvements associated with COTE are documented and analyzed within the context of institutional benchmarks, such as overall retention rates, graduation rates, or equity gaps in online course success.

This data-driven alignment helps institutional leaders plan future investments and initiatives—grounding big-picture decisions in the empirical outcomes of the COTE pilot. Ultimately, ongoing assessment will determine how COTE can be scaled sustainably and which support structures—such as continuous coaching or technical assistance—will be needed to ensure long-term success.

Conclusion

The COTE framework's journey will continue beyond this initial pilot through an ethos of continuous refinement and close alignment with institutional priorities. By responding to pilot feedback, integrating with faculty development structures, and using evidence (in partnership with OIERA) to inform college-wide strategy, COTE can evolve into a permanent cornerstone of quality online teaching at Hostos. Such a data-informed, collaborative approach ensures that the framework not only improves individual courses but also contributes to broader educational excellence and innovation in the years to come, fully in step with the college's mission and strategic goals.

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