

MEMORANDUM

Distance Learning Committee
2005-2006 Year-end Report

Submitted by: D. A. Hicks, Chair
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Committee Membership

Faculty

Barnes, George E (VC)	MANAGEMENT	SM2.232	SM27	gbarnes@utdallas.edu	972-883-2783
Hicks, Donald A (C)	SOCIAL SCIENCES	GR3.804	GR31	dahicks@utdallas.edu	972-883-2733
Kitagawa, Midori	ARTS & HUMANITIES	JO4.810	JO31	midori@utdallas.edu	972-883-2806
Ledbetter, Cynthia E	SCIENCE EDUCATION	FN3.308	FN33	ledbeter@utdallas.edu	972-883-2496
Lewin, Peter	MANAGEMENT	SM3.223	SM31	plewin@utdallas.edu	972-883-2729
Torlak, Murat	ELECTRICAL ENGINEERING	EC3.518	EC33	torlak@utdallas.edu	972-883-4624

RUO

Kratz, Abby R	ACADEMIC AFFAIRS & PROVOST	MP2.103	AD23	ark024000@utdallas.edu	972-883-6742
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Ex-Officio (with vote)

Hargrove, William W	EX. DIRECTOR OF INFORMATION RESOURCES	AD2.403	AD28	hargrove@utdallas.edu	972-883-6883
Cunningham, Austin J	DEAN OF GRADUATE STUDIES	FN3.218	FN31	Austin.Cunningham@utdallas.edu	972-883-2234
Helms, Robert	DEAN OF ENGINEERING & COMPUTER SCIENCE	EC3.728	EC32	rxh033000@utdallas.edu	972-883-2974
Rachavong, Narris D	VP FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS	AD2.412	AD31	dar@utdallas.edu	972-883-6863
Pirkul, Hasan	DEAN OF SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT	SM4.608	SM40	hpirkul@utdallas.edu	972-883-6813

Committee Charge:

*The Committee on Distance Learning is a Concurrent Committee of the Academic Senate charged to analyze, support, and provide planning advice and recommendations regarding distance learning as this activity involves faculty time and effort, and demands upon staff and financial resources. The Committee will advise the President through the Academic Senate on **strategy and policy regarding distance learning**, and will advise the Executive Vice President and Provost, through the Coordinator of the Center for Online Learning and Technology, on **academic and faculty issues that pertain to distance learning**. [Emphasis added]*

Summary 2005-2006 Committee Activities

The Committee met three (3) times during the academic year:
(September 30, 2005; December 12, 2005, April 24, 2006)

A. Organizing Issues: What Are the Recurring Issues Over the Recent Past?

A review of the work of previous Distance Learning (DL) Committees revealed that year after year several questions have dominated discussion:

1. Will the expanded “reach” of online instruction complement or undercut efforts to maintain the highest possible quality in on-site instruction?
2. Are scarce university resources best delivered through a centralized or decentralized (school-specific) distance learning support infrastructure?
3. What is the best way to incent faculty to augment their existing courses with online features (*hybrid model*) and/or to develop more online courses (*pure model*). This includes an acknowledgement of the heavy front-end investments required to develop online instructional materials, as well as the relatively heavier time commitment for online instruction in either a pure or a hybrid model.
4. What is the best way to evaluate the quality of the learning experience associated with the use of new distance learning technologies?

B. Contemporary Usage Patterns and Experiences

The 2005-06 Committee sought to pursue these questions through

- a) An initial assessment of school-specific experiences on the UT-D campus
- and
- b) A survey of individual school adoption/usage patterns

1. University-Wide Perspective

To some extent, the rapid enrollment growth on our campus in the past several years may have blunted some of the momentum of previous years to accelerate the use telecommunication technologies to expand access to higher education beyond the physical campus. However, as this growth has put pressure on existing physical plant – classroom space in particular – and as the college-age population and effective demand for high education across Texas have grown, it is likely that attention will turn once again to distance learning opportunities.

One development that appears to have emerged in recent years is the separate diffusion of online instruction and the use of course management tools such as Blackboard and Web CT for both online and onsite courses. As regards the latter, the recent announcement of the merger of Blackboard and Web CT may well reduce the reticence of nonadopters to consider the use of such tools, as they no longer are faced with questions about which tool is the better

one. Moreover, new rules promulgated in April [2005] by the Coordinating Board (CB) and the subsequent gradual trickling in of reporting instructions from CB staff for measuring distance-learning activities across campuses could well alter this landscape. The following patterns have emerged from “school scans” focused on usage of DL technologies on campus:

1. Not surprisingly, there is evidence that individual schools have adopted varieties of DL technologies in diverse ways that best meet their individual needs. This may argue against a more centralized model with which to promote the use of these tools.
2. For the first time we have spotty time-series evidence of the expanded use of DL activities at the program level (see below). SOM appears to have successfully integrated DL tools and program curricula and generally adapted to the mobility of their target markets.
3. NS&M reports that one of the continuing obstacles to the adoption of DL technologies and their integration into faculty research and teaching is general unfamiliarity with what is available and how it can be used. This may argue for making introductory workshops more or less mandatory at the school level, not unlike the mandatory training exercises we are required annually to complete online. In addition, NS&M appears to have concluded that the best way forward is to adopt a division of labor whereby faculty focus on curriculum content alone and an instructional designer/developer be made available to produce the online course packages (see below).

In order to explore what have become recurring issues/questions, the Committee attempted to conduct “school scans” through the use of a brief survey. Assuming that a “centralized” or “top-down” approach to driving greater adoption of DL technologies was not likely to be productive, these school scans sought to identify patterns of adaptation of DL practices by instructors to the special opportunities/ circumstances in individual schools and courses. The following categories were used:

1. **Inventory of DL usage** [this might include a) [*Hybrid*] evidence of the use of course management software (Blackboard, WebCT) and b) [*Pure*] courses offered to off-site students.
2. **Evidence of “best practices”** - Brief description of DL implementation that appears to work successfully.
3. **School-level support systems** provided to facilitate DL (brief description)
4. **Business model** details: Does a course or a program impose a surcharge on students to support DL-specific activities. Can you estimate how much as been raised (per course, per semester, or for the school in aggregate?)
5. **Strategic significance of DL to school mission?** Evidence of new markets served?

6. **Persistent barriers?** [List obstacles that the university might focus on and remove].

7. **Other-** whatever "nuggets" you think might be usefully passed along.

While the results of these school scans were relatively sparse, those associated with the School of Management (SOM) yielded information worth noting broadly by the university. Accordingly, we bring these forward for consideration.

2. A School-Specific Perspective: The SOM Experience¹

The SOM recognized in the mid-1990s a need to provide graduate level degree courses to customers disenfranchised by geography and time. The students that were served by the development of distance education (now, online) deliverables were those who were actually at a geographic distance, or whose employer's travel commitments prevented them from attending a typical once-a-week 7pm class on campus, or who had a conflict between two courses in their degree program offered at the same time, or who had personal/family constraints, or who were transferred to another city/country prior to completing the UTD degree.

Each of the degree programs that has emerged have different combinations of these students and have different blends of online and face-to-face contact. From the outset, the extension of degree programs into the online environment has been guided by the same rigor and quality control as on-campus courses, including the involvement of the same faculty, and the requirement for interactive contact between faculty and students. A new Web-conferencing (VOIP) tool, *Elluminate*, replaced an older phone-based system in Fall, 2005.

1. The availability of the Internet, and the instructional software platforms that have been developed for it, have created opportunities and challenges for university instruction. Our university has responded somewhat inconsistently.
 - a. On the one hand, as evidenced by the existence of this committee and the programs in some of our schools (most notably the SOM), the response has been positive, even enthusiastic.
 - b. On the other hand, there is the common fear that online-teaching may be a dangerous gimmick that will help us to dilute the quality of our courses and allow standards to deteriorate.
2. Online instruction is not simply on-campus instruction migrated online. There are important mutual complementarities (synergies) between the two. This partially addresses the fear of standards dilution. The development of the internet, along

¹ Commentary provided primarily by Profs. Peter Lewin and George Barnes (SOM). The discussion draws primarily on the experiences in the following programs: a) Global MBA Online program, b) Accounting and Information Management (MS AIM); c) Global Leadership Executive MBA (GLEMBA); and d) Project Management

- with evolving student computer skills, means that instructors will have to adapt to their students' need for seamless online supplements. As our instructors become more comfortable with online tools in their everyday teaching, the likelihood that they will become interested in creating or participating in online courses, tends to be enhanced. (New pervasive technologies imply the development of new “cultures” and this takes time and is not without pain).
3. This raises the issue of university strategy. To the extent that UTD as an institution would like to be a player in the online instruction environment, and would like to see its faculty taking initiative, it will need to consider how to make resources available to that end.
 - a. Should this be as a response to that initiative or should it precede it?
 - b. What should be the source of these funds? Is there a mechanism for facilitating “fee for service” at the local level? A fee for the student?
 - c. There are obvious problems with “unfunded mandates,” articulating a mission, or desired initiative without somehow making the funds available.
 4. A basic principle of planning for online instruction development and delivery would appear to be *a separation of content from mechanism*. The latter should be based on state-of-the-art general purpose (online instructional) technology which is provided as a service to the instructor who is in control of the content. This involves commitment to the employment and use of personnel with special skills in computer-based educational design.
 - a. Should this be university wide – a service organization to the whole university? The benefits are economies of scale – spreading the cost over a wider number of users. Potential costs and dangers are conflicts over usage, ambiguities of authority and accountability, the creation of an underused bureaucracy, etc.
 - b. An alternative is a set of decentralized service organizations – call them distance-instruction-service-centers (DISCs) (one for each school?) accountable to the school or department they serve. The benefits are greater ease of communication and oversight, a tailoring of size and effort to the needs of the school or department, fruitful competition and interaction between the different DISCs which leads to mutual cross fertilization of ideas, etc. Potential dangers are wasteful duplication of effort – multiple bureaucratic islands.
 5. The unresolved debates in online education apparently suggest:
 - a. Quality interaction is key in determining education quality. It occurs in all courses (online and other) at three levels - between student and instructor, between student and student, and between student and content.
 - b. The actual medium of interaction is much less important than the quality of the interaction.