

## Online Education Subcommittee

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### ***Introduction***

Southern Utah University's online education program includes selected master's and bachelor's degrees, portions of other degree offerings, and courses satisfying each of the general education categories (excluding Student Success). The categories of courses divide the online market into several segments, with graduate students and general education students being the majority. Students enrolling in online courses pay the same tuition and fees that apply to campus enrollments, with a technology fee of \$20 per credit added to cover eLearning licensing fees and other support costs. This is a great benefit to online students, but there is no current provision for offering online courses to non-Utah residents in general without charging non-resident tuition. This results in few, if any, non-resident online enrollments. Thus the out-of-state market remains untouched except for self-support cohorts that are the results of specific partnerships.

Recent data reveal that approximately eighty percent of our students enrolled in an online course are also enrolled in a campus section, indicating that campus students are making use of the online offering.

The mission and role of online education fall under the mission of the School of Continuing & Professional Studies, which is to act as an innovative catalyst for the University by providing flexible educational opportunities that enhance economic, technical, and cultural development. In less formal terms, the online program offers a measure of flexibility to students, evidence of which is in the steady enrollment growth over recent years.

A Distance Education Advisory Committee serves as a useful vehicle to identify relevant issues and provide recommendations to administration as well as communication back to the departments. This committee exists by policy and includes a representative from each college as well as other campus departments.

### ***SWOT Analysis***

A SWOT analysis reveals some of the issues relating to online education. We can use this information to direct discussions as to how online education may be more effective at SUU.

#### **Strengths:**

##### **Consistent course management and delivery**

SUU implements a standard course management system (Blackboard eLearning). We strive for unity in our online courses that facilitates technical support and enhances course delivery. As we have transitioned to the current version of eLearning, we have implemented a template that

provides a uniform appearance and function to the deliverable product. This means students spend less time learning to use the system, and faculty can streamline their development efforts.

### **Good online technical support**

Together, SCPS and IT provide the necessary support for students and faculty in the development, delivery, and reception phases of the program.

### **Regular tuition for online courses**

At this point, online courses are part of the student's credit load and tuition schedule. This has resulted in continual growth as students can add online course for whatever reason they may have, and only pay a marginal technology fee over what the charge would have been had the course been taken on campus. This adds flexibility to students' schedules.

### **Quality Instruction**

In most cases, online professors are also teaching campus sections of the same course. This provides the opportunity for online students to have the same quality of instruction as their campus counterparts. The School of Continuing & Professional Studies recognizes the best practices set forth by the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET), an entity founded by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), which stipulate that electronically delivered courses will meet or exceed the standards of excellence pertaining to face-to-face instruction ([www.wcet.edu](http://www.wcet.edu)).

### **Weaknesses:**

#### **Differing levels of faculty/departmental commitment to online education**

There is no administrative expectation that departments offer online courses or even use eLearning at all. This results in varying levels of interest and commitment to online education across campus. This may result in students not being given the fullest learning opportunity possible.

#### **Lack of information for online students**

There is a need for better communication with online students *before* they begin their classes. Whether this comes from a central entity or from each faculty member individually, an online orientation of sorts would relieve some student anxiety and better prepare them for the online experience prior to the beginning of the semester.

### **Opportunities:**

#### **Complete more online degree offerings**

As development funds and departmental interests continue, we look forward to expanding our online degree offerings. In some cases, this may require departments to work together to develop interdisciplinary courses that apply to a particular degree. (For example, PSY 1000 in support of the business management degree.)

#### **Potential enrollment growth with adequate funding**

A funding model that aligns the impact of marginal growth with the corresponding marginal revenue stream, making it possible to offer online courses and establish enrollment caps based on faculty availability and student demand, rather than a fixed and limited budget.

### **Establish training and quality standards**

Though we have offered training in many areas of eLearning, the effort has been based largely on our own perceptions of what is needed. We have not established any training protocols that can be measured against any regional or national quality standards. Doing so would provide greater credibility and improved training efforts.

### **Improve technical support network**

Include online education in the proposed faculty development center.

### **Threats:**

#### **Inadequate funding for online instruction**

Online instruction follows a different cost structure than campus sections. We need to recognize this and identify a funding model that adequately covers related expenses.

#### **Lack of development funding**

Recent budget cuts have reduced our development funds from \$50,000 to \$20,000. This is enough to develop about six courses a year. If we hope to expand our degree offerings, we need to be able to develop 15-20 courses a year to keep pace with demand and students' progression through a given program. The inability to meet the demand will diminish student interest in online degree programs.

#### **Cannibalizes campus enrollments**

It has long been recognized that online enrollments draw students away from the campus classroom. Some departments have been successful in managing campus enrollments by selectively offering courses online. However, the unlimited offering of online courses can diminish campus enrollments and hurt our space utilization. Deans and chairs need to make informed decisions as to when online courses are offered in relation to their campus counterparts.

### ***Future Opportunities for Online Degree Programs***

Southern Utah University's office of Distance Education currently oversees the development and delivery of all online courses. Distance Education staff work closely with faculty to convert existing course materials to an online deliverable format, striving to preserve the integrity of the curricula and their learning objectives.

Currently SUU offers at least one online course in all but one of the general education categories, making it possible for students to meet those requirements. Several degree programs are either complete or nearly complete in online format. We continue to develop courses that fill in the gaps in degree programs.

As SUU seeks to improve the quality of instruction and distinguish itself through experiential learning, the online education program should also be elevated to reflect that mission. The online offering should focus on selected degree programs. Currently development funds are being directed to the completion of several degree programs. Limited funding makes this a slow process, but the effort is ongoing, and continued development funding will ensure the expansion of complete degree offerings to online students.

An analysis of our online enrollments over a three-year period revealed that more than half of the enrollments were in general education courses. While this provides a solid foundation for the program, we believe the emphasis for the future should be on degree programs. This would not only provide greater service to our students, but would give SUU's online education a stronger reputation and would be more in alignment with our mission.

### ***Professional and Technical Support***

SUU's online education has made great progress in the last decade. We have successfully implemented a standardized course management system (WebCT/eLearning), established a uniform appearance and function for course delivery, established a student technical help desk, and held regular training sessions for faculty. However, as enrollments grow and more courses are offered, there is a greater need for cohesive services for students and faculty. This may include:

- A prescribed orientation for students who are new to online education
- A well-defined training protocol for faculty
- Elevated quality of online instruction and delivery
- Use of eLearning to its fullest capability
- Improved professional development for SUU faculty and trainers
- Better definition of roles among those involved in online education

### ***Recommendation***

#### **Distance Education Advisory Committee**

- The committee should have a strong role in providing leadership and direction on program development and in identifying criteria for course development and maintenance.

#### **Faculty Development Center**

- Establish a development and training entity that can oversee all aspects of technical and training issues related to online education, including expertise in online pedagogy. This could be under the umbrella of the university's main faculty development center that is being proposed.

#### **Funding/Tuition Model**

- Implement a model that directly ties online registration revenues to online expenses.
  - This model must cover all related expenses: instruction, benefits, course development/maintenance, licensing, technical support, and so on.
  - Courses should be budgeted related to the extent possible.

### *Impacts*

Any change in the tuition model that results in students paying more will precipitate changes in our online market. It will be necessary to be prepared for those changes and seek new markets.

Currently, online overload instruction is approaching \$400,000 for fall and spring. This does not include benefits or any other indirect expense.

### References

[http://wiche.edu/attachment\\_library/Accrediting\\_BestPractices.pdf](http://wiche.edu/attachment_library/Accrediting_BestPractices.pdf)