

Distance Education Task Force Report

Executive Summary

The Distance Education Task Force was asked to do four things:

1. Determine the nature and scope of distance education activities currently underway as well as those planned to begin in the next two to three years.
2. Share strategic plans or goals of programs, divisions, departments and colleges which define their expectations for distance education activities.
3. Develop a list of recommendations to the Information Technology Council which includes policy, needed resources, facilities, services and expertise.
4. Prepare a vision statement for distance education that addresses the needs of the entire campus.

Nature and Scope

Since the University offers a range of distance education opportunities, we reviewed definitions from several sources before adopting a definition of distance learning that would encompass that diversity.

“The process of extending learning or delivering instructional resource-sharing opportunities to locations away from a classroom, building or site, to another classroom, building or site by using video, audio, computer, multimedia, communications, or some combination of these with other traditional delivery methods.” <http://144.162.197.250/definition.htm>

We may conclude that Distance Education is the process of providing...

“...learning opportunities, live or on-demand, synchronous, asynchronous or blended, mixing traditional classroom experiences with the options afforded by the most user-appropriate and pedagogically sound “technologies of connectivity” in order to offer, expand, and enhance a learning environment and the interactions that transpire between educator and learner, faculty and student.”

The Task Force faced two challenges in assessing the nature and scope of Distance Education at the University. 1) Reporting methods for reporting Distance Education activities differ across the University and 2) there is no single repository for data on Distance Education courses. Consequently, a Summary Report of Distance Education course offerings was concatenated from data supplied by our Task Force Web Survey, AOCE, Uonline/TACC, Utah System of Higher Education/State Board of Regents Reports and listings supplied by numerous individual departments, programs and colleges.

We were able to itemize 349 unique course titles offered by 55 sponsoring departments and programs spanning the Summer Semester of 2006 to Spring Semester 2008. The University has 19 colleges, 95 academic departments and 20 interdisciplinary programs. Using academic departments and interdisciplinary programs as a base (N=115) we determined that 47% (N=55) of these entities provide distance education course work and events during our time span.

Rate of growth for asynchronous computer-based courses has been significant as illustrated by the Uonline Chart shown on Page 5 of the Task Force Report. While the statistics for other delivery methods are not as dramatic as this, across the board, they are significant. The Sloan Consortium Report, *Making the Grade*, indicates that University of Utah Distance Education efforts are in the mainstream rather than on the leading or trailing edges of Distance Education activities.

http://www.sloan-c.org/publications/survey/pdf/making_the_grade.pdf

Many departments have concrete plans for Distance Education activities in the next two years. Several

others are in a formative stage of considering Distance Education activities.

Departmental Plans and Goals for Distance Education

We found that with very few exceptions programs, divisions, departments and colleges have not defined their expectations for distance education activities. The College of Nursing and AOCE have well conceived plans for their distance education activities. Some other departments, Psychology and Mechanical Engineering for example, have less formal expectations and plans. But there is not a wealth of information about other efforts that could be identified. However, all respondents indicated they would continue to offer courses via Distance Education in the foreseeable future

Recommendations

The following recommendations are a distillation of the highest priority obstacle-resolutions included in the report. They fall into three primary categories: coordination, funding and assessment/research. (See details of the Obstacles and Resolutions on pages 13 through 17 of the complete report.)

Coordinate the diverse Distance Education efforts at the University

- Create an immediate initiative, with input from the office of Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs and Undergraduate Studies, the office of the Associate Vice President for Information Technology and the Associate Vice President for Health Sciences Information Technology to establish a way of coordinating Distance Education at the University of Utah. It is recommended that this be accomplished by instituting a **Distance Education committee** or sub-committee to report to ITC.

The committee should include representatives from **Service Providers** (candidates include: Academic Outreach and Continuing Education, Technology Assisted Curriculum Center, Instructional Media Services, Media Solutions, members of the Cyber-Infrastructure Committee, representatives from the Open Learning group [Psychology], Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence, Center for Disability Services, University Scheduling offices and Utah Education Network) as well as representative **Curriculum Providers** (departments, colleges, and schools) who can represent 1) the interests of the teaching mission as a whole and 2) the interests of the instructors who create and teach the classes and Student Representation.

- Designate or create a Distance Education ombudsman or other **single point of contact** at the University for external agencies (e.g., UEN) and, possibly, vendors.
- Develop an initiative to **educate higher administration** at the University of Utah about the critical importance of Distance Education in its future and of the status of the University's efforts relative to sister institutions in Utah and institutions across the nation.
- Create a Communication Portal for Distance Education to allow curriculum and service providers and administrators to communicate easily by email lists, a newsletter, and other ways to make Distance Education information such as policies, copyright, fees assessment, etc. consistent and easily accessible across the University.

The coordination of Distance Education should **leverage the strength of the discipline specific diversity** of Curriculum Providers that exists at a research institution like the University of Utah while avoiding policies that homogenize its rich cultural differences.

Address the budgetary needs of Curriculum and Service Providers' to support the creation, development and delivery of Distance Education classes.

There are budgetary needs in several areas outlined in the Obstacles/Resolution section of this report. They include budgetary support for both Curriculum Providers and Service Providers and address personnel, infrastructure and support issues.

Assess and research elements to support the growth of Distance Education

- local or regional centers or authenticated computer-based for Distance Education examination/testing.
- facilities, including classrooms, designed and designated specifically for Distance Education teaching.
- need for accessible, affordable mass storage for Distance Education materials and media.
- need for maintenance, repair or replacement of enterprise level hardware and software.
- need for a Help/Information point of contact for Distance Education-specific student/user problems.

Vision Statement

The Distance Education Task Force offers a vision that the University provide students with the opportunity to learn at anytime, anyplace, and at-any-pace, delivered through the most user-appropriate and pedagogically sound technologies in order to ultimately enhance the connectivity between educator and learner, faculty and student, in higher education courses, activities, and assessments. The availability and usability of the technologies of connectivity greatly enhance the options for faculty to reach their students and for students to participate in higher education activities. The Distance Education programs at the University of Utah will be well coordinated, well supported, of the highest educational quality, and will attract high caliber students to programs where they are offered.

The Distance Education Task Force understands that this vision can come to fruition by building upon two basic criteria. First, the University of Utah must commit to attaining a competitive advantage in Distance Education that will compliment the high quality education that it now offers. Second, the University, in collaboration with the Utah Education Network, must establish a support infrastructure that will allow faculty and students, in all institutions, colleges and departments, to easily access, acquire and develop academic information in all appropriate media and technologies.

Complete electronic copies of the Distance Education Task Force Report and related Appendices are located at the following two urls:

<http://www.it.utah.edu/leadership/committees/DistanceEd/papers/DistEdTaskForceFinalRpt2008.pdf>

<http://www.it.utah.edu/leadership/committees/DistanceEd/papers/DistEdTaskForceFinalRpt2008.zip>

(Word Doc)

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