

**Response to ACUE/Faculty Senate Report on Issues in E-Learning
Penn State Online Steering Committee
February 23, 2007**

The University created Penn State Online to ensure effective coordination among a number of e-learning initiatives and to ensure University-wide support for e-learning delivery. A Coordinating Council, with representatives of both central and college-level e-learning units, was created to respond to operational issues and develops policy and procedures. It reports to the Penn State Online Steering Committee, which is the governing body for Penn State Online. The Penn State Online Coordinating Council has reviewed the December 21, 2006, "Report of the ACUE/Senate Work Group on Academic Issues in Online Education." The purpose of the whitepaper was to articulate issues that need to be addressed as online education becomes more pervasive. The following responses to the ACUE/Faculty Senate Report on Issues in e-Learning was developed by the Coordinating Council and approved by the Penn State Online Steering Committee.

General Reflections

ACUE/Faculty Senate Report Item: *The Work Group was asked to identify academic issues related to online education. The group interviewed eleven faculty, staff, and administrators to gain information. It found that there are differences in opinion around a number of key elements of e-learning.*

Discussion: Differences of opinion would no doubt be found in any issue related to the teaching/learning environment. In addition, the differences of opinion related to e-learning may also be attributed to the fact that the individuals interviewed tend to have worked in a specific and unique e-learning context, or perhaps have not worked directly with e-learning at all. These individual experiences inevitably will color individual views of academic issues, We also note that this is a rapidly evolving function and that the experiences of faculty/staff/administrators two years ago will be different from the experiences of colleagues this year. It is important that we distill strategic issues that affect academic quality from the inevitable short-term differences in perception and opinion that arise in a period of transition.

Of utmost importance is a concern that the report is framed around a distinction that is increasingly invalid: "e-learning" as distinct from "resident instruction." Several years ago, e-learning was largely identified with the World Campus, which is directed to off-campus, nontraditional students. However, today, e-learning plays a significant role in teaching traditional students--on campus and inter-campus, as well as at a distance. For every Penn State student, learning is now a blend of curricular and co-curricular experiences that take place online and face-to-face. The issues need to be framed in this emerging context. The basic questions that we must ask as an institution are: In what ways are the differences between teaching and learning online and in a classroom

consequential? How can we ensure that the consequences do not affect quality adversely?

Recently, the Senate Outreach Committee presented an extensive report on quality in e-learning developed by Dr. Melody Thompson, College of Education. This report was not referenced in the Work Group's report. We recommend that it be reviewed by the Work Group before their report is finalized.

The ACUE/Faculty Senate whitepaper addressed eight specific issues. The Penn State Online Coordinating Council has these responses to those individual issues:

1. Curricular Planning

ACUE/Faculty Senate Report Item: *The Working Group raised a concern about faculty involvement in the development of e-learning courses and a concern that the “right of first refusal” principle may make it impossible for faculty from campuses other than University Park to take initiative to develop e-learning courses.*

Discussion: E-learning courses are developed for different reasons. The World Campus funds development of some e-learning courses to meet the needs of adult learners; the centrally funded Courseware Initiative and Blended Learning Initiative fund others to lower cost or improve the efficiency of on-campus and inter-campus instruction; individual colleges fund and support still others to meet their own needs. However, in all cases, academic units and individual faculty members determine and implement all course development. With the University-wide adoption of ANGEL, all faculty members are encouraged to integrate e-learning elements into their on-campus courses. Penn State Online is developing a website that will list all online courses; this should improve communication and avoid confusion and duplication of effort in course development

What appears as a lack of consensus may better be seen as reflecting the fact that the development of e-learning courses is stimulated and supported in multiple ways. The key issue is to ensure that faculty members have adequate instructional design and technical support (which is addressed under item 3 below).

The Work Group also notes that the “right of first refusal” principle may make it impossible for faculty from campuses other than University Park to take initiative to develop e-learning courses. This is not necessarily the case—faculty may develop online courses for use at their local campus and there are already examples of campus faculty developing on-line courses for delivery to other campuses. However, the “right of first refusal” concept speaks to the value of consultation and the need to steward University resources. To some extent, the concern may be greater today because of the move to common course abbreviations, which eliminated some unique course numbers at individual campuses. ACUE has made considerable progress on defining disciplinary communities, which also will ameliorate this concern. These communities are the logical venue for consultation, which will allow for timely development of needed on-line courses and curricula as well as good stewardship of University resources.

Recommendation: The origins and implications of the “right of first refusal” are not clear. ACUE should take up this issue and provide clear guidance.

2. Academic Oversight

ACUE/Faculty Senate Report Item: *The Work Group notes a lack of consensus on the role of the Faculty Senate and/or ACUE in approving the creation of e-learning versions of courses.*

Discussion: The Coordinating Council believes that there is no compelling argument for an additional oversight in this area. Penn State’s policy is that a course is defined by its objectives, not by the materials that faculty use or by the environment in which it is delivered. Penn State course objectives can be achieved in multiple ways. As e-learning (broadly defined) becomes commonplace on campus as well as off-campus, it will become impossible to have separate approval on the various ways in which a course can be delivered.

Recommendation: The Penn State Online Steering Committee does not support additional Faculty Senate approval of existing courses that are adapted for online delivery. However, it recommends that the Faculty Senate work with the Penn State Online Coordinating Council to develop and maintain quality standards.

3. Harnessing Faculty Creativity: Incentives, Training, and Evaluation

ACUE/Faculty Senate Report Item: *The Work Group noted that many faculty members do not have the opportunity to develop the skills needed to be effective online instructors and that support for faculty is not consistent.*

Discussion: The Coordinating Council agrees that faculty who wish to adapt a course to the e-learning environment should have access to effective support services. Currently, there are three sources of central support, depending on the faculty member’s intended use of a course: Educational Technology Services in Information Technology Services, the World Campus in Outreach, and the Schreyer Institute in Undergraduate Programs. In addition, several colleges have created their own e-learning support units.

Recommendation: Penn State Online should encourage and reinforce the development of support services within individual units, with the unit e-learning champion positioned as a single point of contact. Faculty members in units that do not have internal e-learning development units should be able to turn to the Penn State Online Coordinating Council for advice and consultation.

Recommendation: Faculty work in this area should be seen part of the scholarship of teaching. A voluntary peer review system should be developed by academic units. Penn State Online, in consultation with the Faculty Senate, should develop standards to guide these reviews. The Penn State Online Steering Committee will begin this process.

4. Making e-Learning More Student Centered: Advising and Support Services

ACUE/Faculty Senate Report Item: *The Work Group noted that not all students are equally prepared for the online environment and that advising, orientation, and other support services must be available to all students.*

Discussion: The World Campus has developed student services to support online students at a distance. This level of support should be the default scenario for all Penn State online learning environments. It is important that all campuses have appropriate support services and that we identify and implement those things that can be centralized in order to ensure equity of service and lower cost.

The issue of ensuring that students are “prepared to learn” cannot be limited to e-learning. It may be useful to compare the course drop-rate for resident instruction. There is also a general lack of understanding about what the research says on this issue.

Recommendation: Penn State Online will explore the possibility of organizing a research symposium on this issue. In addition, Penn State Online will work with the World Campus and other units to ensure that student services, including student assessment of online learning readiness, is coordinated and available for all students studying online.

5. Evaluation of Courses and Programs

ACUE/Faculty Senate Report Item: *The report recommends that there be a clear cycle of assessment and quality improvement for e-learning courses and programs.*

Discussion: Penn State Online is preparing a recommendation that Penn State adapt the “Quality Matters” national assessment protocol as a standard. A University-wide standard that is tied to a national benchmark will ensure a consistent quality and process improvement.

Recommendation: The Penn State Online Coordinating Council, working through the University-wide Assessment Council and the recently named e-Learning Champions in individual academic units, will implement this assessment once it is approved by the Steering Committee.

6. Broader Consultation with Disciplinary Communities

ACUE/Faculty Senate Report Item: *The Work Group encouraged faculty members who teach online to work within disciplinary communities established to improve curricular integrity.*

Recommendation: Existing mechanisms identified by Penn State Online should be applied across units to ensure the development of communities among faculty members who teach on-line. This community should include the Academic e-Learning Alliance

and the e-Education Council, as well as through e-learning champions appointed in individual academic units, and other forums. This should be expanded as the community of faculty members involved in e-learning grows.

7. Communication Practices of World Campus, Continuing Education, and e-Learning Cooperative

ACUE/Faculty Senate Report Item: *The whitepaper calls for closer alignment among key units involved in online learning.*

Discussion: Penn State Online Coordinating Council is currently exploring how to better align the primary central functions related to e-learning across the three major central services: Information Technology Services, Outreach, and Undergraduate Education.

Recommendation: The Penn State Online Steering Committee will aggressively advance the alignment of responsibilities recommended by these units and develop a website that provides communication and coordination with all online learning academic, student and administrative issues.

8. Resource Sharing

ACUE/Faculty Senate Report Item: *The Work Group proposes development of a university-wide repository of online materials, activities, and training resources.*

Discussion: The Coordinating Council strongly supports the recommendation that Penn State create a University-wide network of online learning object repositories. Hybrid courses and online learning objects within courses should be available, wherever appropriate, as open educational resources organized within individual academic units and cross-unit interest communities (i.e., regional interests, inter-disciplinary interests, etc.). The Steering Committee should adopt standards to guide the development of these communities and resources.

Recommendation: The University should encourage the development of open access resources that can be shared with faculty across Penn State locations and at other institutions, building on the examples of Merlot, the Open Courseware Initiative, and other national benchmarks. The Steering Committee is examining the idea of creating a task force, through the Coordinating Council, to develop standards and an operational plan.