

REPORT OF THE
DISTANCE EDUCATION TASK FORCE

Appalachian State University
Boone, North Carolina

November 2017

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Spring 2017, Provost Kruger charged a Task Force to complete the following tasks: (a) examine the elements or components that impact DE-- curriculum, policy, professional development, etc.-- as they currently exist and then explore where we might want to go as an institution; (b) provide ideas for expanding our reach beyond our current region; and (c) provide recommendations for more consistent DE operations that will result in a more predictable contribution to the overall budget of the institution.

Members of this Task Force examined relevant data through the lens of the standards issued by the Council of Regional Accrediting Commission (C-RAC) to develop the following twelve recommendations, listed in priority standing:

1. Revise the Appalachian Mission and Vision statement to acknowledge the role of Distance Education in expanding accessibility of programs.
2. Ensure that DE options provide a transformational educational experience whether the course is taught face-to-face, hybrid, or online. This includes \$50,000.00 to be allocated each year to support stipends for faculty members to complete a four-week training with staff of CAE and LTS to develop and teach online courses in alignment with the Quality Matters, the “gold standard” for online course design.
3. Clearly define “online” to include clear percentages of the amount of online versus face-to-face in applying the label.
4. Further investigate ways to better utilize DE resources and capitalize on DE’s expertise while increasing engagement of faculty and departments who offer online DE courses.
5. Create stronger communication between DE and the various departments on campus by giving faculty and Chairs more voice in DE operations.
6. Require each department to develop a peer review process or some kind of oversight for the development and teaching of online courses while also safe-guarding academic freedom.
7. Put into place effective procedures and policies to safe-guard academic integrity of students in online courses.
8. When faculty use the standard course management system (ASULearn and related tools such as Zoom, Google Drive), we recommend that the syllabus include a specific reminder that access to campus IT resources may be revoked if students share login information.
9. Utilize online sessions to help free up classroom space every other week by creating hybrid courses that combine face to face sessions with online.

10. Create ways to blur the lines between DE and campus students and faculty by addressing the fee structure to allow DE students to opt for paying athletic and other fees that would allow them to take advantage of campus events and activities.
11. Offer more awards to recognize the contributions and accomplishments of DE faculty and students. Encourage DE students to become part of the campus community through establishment of blogs, forums and other online sources.
12. Do not engage an online program manager (OPM) for our online programs.

REPORT OF THE DISTANCE EDUCATION TASK FORCE APPALACHIAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Introduction

At Appalachian State University, we will continue to provide students with a transformational education by creating and maintaining intellectually challenging academic programs and extra-curricular experiences that involve them in civic engagement and community service. We will continue to positively impact student and faculty success by expanding e-learning opportunities and increase access to innovative learning technologies. (Appalachian State University Strategic Plan, url: <http://www.appstate.edu/about/strategic-plan/> retrieved October 15, 2017)

In Spring 2017, Provost Kruger charged a Task Force of eighteen representatives of faculty, staff, and administrators from across the university (see Appendix A) to examine and make recommendations for the improvement of online distance education at Appalachian State University. Through this charge, the Provost sought recommendations to improve Appalachian State's online offerings. Recognizing that there is an opportunity to expand the reach of the institution, the Task Force was also charged with examining ways to create more consistent Distance Education (DE) operations that will result in a more predictable contribution to the university's operations through budget allocations from the state. The Provost charged this Task Force to complete the following tasks:

- Examine the elements or components that impact DE-- curriculum, policy, professional development, etc.-- as they currently exist and then explore where we might want to go as an institution;
- Provide recommendations to improve ASU as an online institution;
- Provide ideas for expanding our reach beyond the Northwest Region of North Carolina;
- Provide recommendations for a more consistent DE operations that will result in a more predictable contribution to the overall budget of the institution; and
- Provide a full report with recommendations to the Provost by end of November 2017.

To meet this charge, the Task Force divided into the following three subcommittees:

- (a) Mission, Management and Resources;
- (b) Academic Oversight, Effectiveness and Integrity; and
- (c) Curricula and Support for Faculty and Students.

This approach allowed each subcommittee to examine more deeply specific areas of the Distance Education online programming through the lens of the Interregional Guidelines for the Evaluation of Distance Education (2012) and the Council of Regional Accrediting Commission (C-RAC). A cross-walk between the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) Accreditation Standards and the C-RAC Guidelines offered an organizational structure for this work. The Task Force met each month from April through October 2017 with subcommittee meetings occurring as needed throughout this time.

The Current State of Distance Education at Appalachian State University

Appalachian State has been reaching out to surrounding communities with credit-bearing and non-credit programs since the 1960's. This tradition of professors driving off the mountain to deliver classes and programs continues today with what has evolved into Distance Education (DE), with personnel and offices in three area community colleges as well as at multiple other sites across the region.

With the challenges in higher education in North Carolina and around the nation, online education is rapidly being considered a practical and necessary response to a changing society demanding more flexibility than traditional campuses can offer. At Appalachian, our current student population has increasingly chosen online as their preferred means of course delivery resulting in more and more programs moving in this direction since Fall 2011 (see Figure 1).

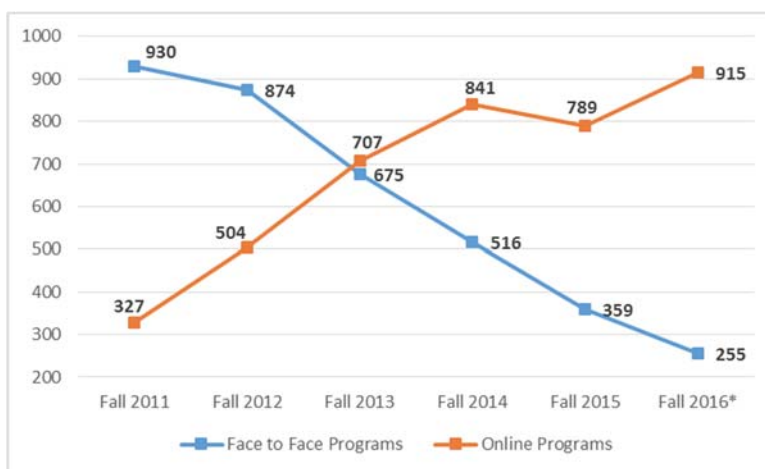


Figure 1. Comparison of Number of Students in Face-to-Face and Online Programs between Fall 2011 and Fall 2016.

Overall, Distance Education (DE) enrollment trends at Appalachian between 2002 and 2016 indicate challenges for both undergraduate and graduate programs (see Figure 2). A key challenge involves the short-term nature of DE cohorts - usually about two academic years - which results in the constant ending and starting of cohorts and programs. The statewide decision to discontinue support for master's degrees in Education resulted in sharp decreases in enrollments (see Figure 2).

This lack of consistency adds to the challenges of resource allocation from the state, and therefore impacts the budgets of the university and its colleges. One approach to mitigating these challenges, when sufficient student interest is present, is the practice of adopting a rolling enrollment model. In rolling cohorts, new students are accepted into a program independent of a standing cohort two or even three terms each year. While this may expand access to programs since students are not forced to wait until a new cohort "makes," there are challenges such as scheduling and staffing. This tends to result in rolling cohorts being implemented in only 16% of existing DE programs thus having a relatively minor impact university-wide.

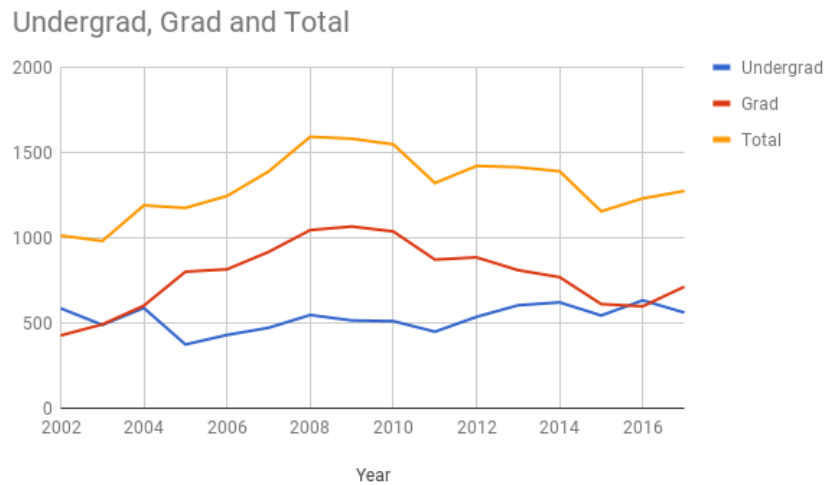


Figure 2. Distance Education Enrollments between 2002 and 2016.

Today, five academic colleges partner with DE to offer about 36 programs in 80+ cohorts serving 1274 DE students predominantly at the graduate level and online. The average cohort size across active cohorts is 19, and the median is 12, with a range from 2 to 145. In Fall 2017, DE started 16 new cohorts, bringing over 400 new students to the university in the process. Looking forward, seventeen cohorts are slated to end by Fall 2018, which will be met by a similar number of replacement cohorts to be inserted into the Fall 2018 schedule.

In the past academic year, DE initiated a reorganization aimed at improving services, building capacity, and improving employee morale. Part of this initiative has been the development of a new state-of-the-art website which opens the door to a new digital recruiting strategy. The results of these efforts will not be known until the middle of 2018, but the expectations are that by moving into the high-tech environment we will be able to expand the reach of many of our programs. Meanwhile, our high-touch recruiting practices continue for those programs where those strategies continue to be indicated.

Sources of Data Examined by Sub-Committees

Members of the sub-committees determined which data were necessary to address their assigned C-RAC standards as well to provide insight into Appalachian’s current Distance Education programs. In one case, the sub-committee investigated documents and websites from two prominent universities in online education: Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) and East Carolina University (ECU) for comparison.

These data sources included the following:

- Marketing materials for Distance Education programs offered at Appalachian State as well as from prominent online campuses such as Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) and East Carolina University (ECU);
- Appalachian State and UNC General Administration Strategic Plans;
- Appalachian State Mission and Vision Statements;
- Appalachian State Faculty Handbook;
- Professional Development materials from ASU, SNHU, and ECU;
- UNC General Administration policy regarding online courses;
- UNC General Administration Task Force report;
- American Association of University Professors (AAUP) Distance Education policies;
- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) best practices for online courses;
- Appstate.edu website (<https://www.appstate.edu>);
- Appalachian Distance Education website (<https://distance.appstate.edu/>);
- Review of the university's most recent Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) self-study report of faculty who are currently teaching or have taught online;
- Interviews with administrators and faculty who are currently teaching online or who have taught online in Distance Education; and
- Interviews with deans, associate deans, chairs, and staff representing the following colleges and units:
 - College of Health Sciences
 - College of Arts & Sciences
 - College of Business
 - College of Education
 - College of Business Advising
 - Office of General Education
 - Distance Education

Analyses of Data and General Conclusions

The sub-committees assessed Distance Education at Appalachian State (see Table 1) against the guidelines provided by the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC), which is composed of seven regional accrediting bodies, including the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) with discussion following.

Table 1

Summary of Alignment of Appalachian State’s Practices with C-RAC Interregional Guidelines for the Evaluation of Distance Education

C-RAC Guidelines	Fully Met	Partially Met	Not Met
1. Online learning is appropriate to the institution’s mission and purposes.		X	
2. The institution’s plans for developing, sustaining, and, if appropriate, expanding online learning offerings are integrated into its regular planning and evaluation processes.		X	
3. Online learning is incorporated into the institution’s systems of governance and academic oversight.	X		
4. Curricula for the institution’s online learning offerings are coherent, cohesive, and comparable in academic rigor to programs offered in traditional instructional formats.	X		
5. The institution evaluates the effectiveness of its online learning offerings, including the extent to which the online learning goals are achieved, and uses the results of its evaluations to enhance the attainment of the goals.	X		
6. Faculty responsible for delivering the online learning curricula and evaluating the students’ success in achieving the online learning goals are appropriately qualified and effectively supported.		X	
7. The institution provides effective student and academic services to support students enrolled in online learning offerings.	X		
8. The institution provides sufficient resources to support and, if appropriate, expand its online learning offerings.		X	
9. The institution assures the integrity of its online offerings.		X	

Discussion of the Findings

The C-RAC guidelines offer valuable assistance to degree-granting institutions with online distance education programs preparing for accreditation. By analyzing the appropriate data, it is possible to determine those areas that may need improvement prior to an actual accreditation review. The following provide insight into the findings of the Task Force as summarized in Table 1 above. These findings also inform the recommendations that follow.

The recommendations are closely aligned with the analyses of the data collected by each sub-committee. If there appeared to be areas in need of improvement or capable of sustaining growth, these standards were not considered to be “fully met.” Only when data supported a high level of alignment with the indicators supplied by C-RAC was the standard considered to be “fully met.”

In some cases, there may be apparent contradictions in findings and recommendations. This can be explained by the focus of each sub-committee on data using the lens of specific standards and their indicators. There also appeared to be some overlap of the standards that resulted in different perspectives among committees. Where possible and advisable, these contradictions have been resolved through input by the full Task Force membership.

Guideline One While Appalachian appears to support online learning and use of technology in its mission statement and strategic plan, Distance Education is not explicitly identified. This guideline is not fully met due to the concern that the current mission and vision of ASU does not clearly reflect our commitment to DE. The focus is almost exclusively on our location and the value of being on the physical campus in Boone, which, without acknowledgement of our online capabilities, actually may limit accessibility to our programs and discourage student applicants.

Guideline Two Appalachian has provided sufficient levels of support for DE in terms of staff, office space, website support, and other technologies. In managing the academic programs, we have the resources in place to support DE. While there is always a continuous need to monitor and improve this area, the Task Force found that this guideline is partially met due to the following concerns. First, the level of support for DE programs is stagnant and even decreasing (in terms of tech support, marketing, admissions support, advising, etc.) as growth continues in other priority areas of the university.

Secondly, there is a clear need to have a point person or staff to coordinate branding, messaging, and market research for DE programs (currently distributed across multiple entities, including DE office, Graduate School, programs/departments, and University Communications (UComm)) with the result that confusing and even conflicting information is being given to prospective students. We are not capitalizing on DE’s reach to leverage options by increasing international enrollment or bringing more programs online. While information may be accurate, it is often confusing to students as to where to find this information.

Third, there are no standards across campus regarding faculty/student ratios, scheduling, pedagogy, technologies utilized, compensation for teaching online, etc. There appears to be a wide discrepancy across programs and colleges concerning these areas. As more courses move online, there is a need to address issues of equity.

Fourth, DE has understandably focused exclusively on reaching out to students at a distance but has been underutilized as a means of meeting the needs of on campus students in terms of freeing up classroom space through use of online course offerings.

Finally, the current model of DE creates two classes of students and faculty at Appalachian. As more faculty utilize technologies that provide greater access, the distinction between on- and off-campus becomes blurred.

Guideline Three We believe that we meet these guidelines vis-à-vis the current institutional effectiveness process, which can be referenced on the Institutional Research, Assessment and Planning (IRAP) website: <https://irap.appstate.edu/institutional-effectiveness>. Also on that website is the standards document (*Comprehensive Review Standards for Academic Units*) used to guide this self-study. The Task Force members find that Appalachian is meeting or exceeding this guideline.

Guideline Four We found that faculty submit course syllabi for online courses, just as with face-to-face courses. Department chairs review syllabi to ensure consistency of workload and content compared with face-to-face courses. Faculty take responsibility for effective instruction for an online course or program and are expected to ensure that outcomes are equivalent to those taught face-to-face. Faculty implement online strategies that build a learning environment that include by are not limited to the following:

- Regular communication with students
- Student-centered learning
- Effective assessment of student learning

The Center for Academic Excellence (CAE) offers workshops for faculty on technology and teaching. The Center for Academic Excellence has offered to perform a modified Quality Matters (QM) review of online and DE courses; however, with current staffing, CAE could not provide QM review for every existing course.

Faculty consider a broad range of technologies to determine the most effective balance between synchronous or asynchronous modes of instruction within online courses.

Publications and advertising for online classes and programs are accurate and contain necessary information such as program goals, requirements, academic calendar, and faculty information.

Guideline Five Assessment of student learning follows processes used in onsite courses or programs and/or reflects good practice in assessment methods. Student course-evaluations are routinely used and an analysis of responses contributes to strategies for course improvements.

The program(s) engages in ongoing, integrated, research-based planning and evaluation that results in continual improvement in quality and demonstrates that it is effectively accomplishing its mission and goals. Appalachian regularly evaluates the effectiveness of the academic and support services provided to students in online courses and uses the results for improvement.

Appalachian provides examples of student work and student interactions among themselves and with faculty. Appalachian demonstrates the appropriate use of technology to support its assessment strategies.

Guideline Six Appalachian provides professional development opportunities for online teaching through Learning Technology Systems (LTS) and through some colleges and departments, such as Leadership and Educational Studies and the College of Education. The current LTS structure is a five-person instructional development team, which may not be sufficient to meet the growing needs on our campus as online offerings continue to expand. Increasingly, there is a shortage of professional development support for teaching online in relation to the growth of DE programs.

Guideline Seven The University Libraries provide 24/7 online support and resources through the following services:

- website,
- online workshops,
- one-on-one in-depth research assistance via web-conference,
- phone,
- chat and email,
- online tutorials and archived instruction sessions,
- online and face-to-face instruction sessions,
- print, media and e-resources mailed/e-mailed to students homes,
- access to other library collections throughout the world through InterLibrary Loan.

The University Writing Center provides one-on-one in-depth writing assistance via web-conference, phone, and email. Distance Education department provides information and access to student support services: <https://distancestudents.appstate.edu/student-resources>.

The Learning Management System (LMS), called AsULearn, provides the University community a secure environment for teaching and learning. Throughout the duration of the course/program, students have access to appropriate technical assistance and technical support. Students receive technical support only. Since they do not pay the same students fees, understandably, they do not have access to many of the student support services available to campus-based students.

Efforts are made to engage students in the University and learning communities. There are policies and processes in place to support ADA requirements in all learning environments, whether face-to-face or online.

While most of the practices at Appalachian meet the criteria of this guideline, there are some areas the Task Force feel should be considered as well. DE students do not have access to the same support services as on campus students since they do not pay the same added fees beyond tuition. DE students do not have an online learning community in place to feel a part of the university culture, which may lead to isolation and low graduation rates. DE students do not have access to clubs or any of the student centers here on campus. DE Graduate students are not eligible for the same awards or assistantships as those offered to on campus students.

Guideline Eight Feedback from campus constituents indicates that there is a lack of support after 5:00 PM for LMS/ DE issues although many DE graduate courses are scheduled for evenings to accommodate student work schedules.

There is a need for more transparency in the financial model for DE. There are questions concerning state subsidy of DE courses/programs and if this compares to campus courses. Is the current rationale for cost per credit hour still valid? Online may not be a cost savings, given that some of our platforms must be developed and supported in-house with greater investment in professional development and faculty lines to support increased enrollment. Does our current model reflect costs – or even limit us in what we are able to do?

Guideline Nine Regarding Academic Integrity, we could not find any statements in the University’s policy pertaining to online learning. In addition, the “Use of Computers and Data Communications” policy statement (http://policy.appstate.edu/Use_of_Computers_and_Data_Communications) should be strengthened to specifically address giving other students access to an account for the purposes of cheating, perhaps moving the statement about giving others access from the guidelines section (4.2) to the misuse section (4.1.1). In addition, this policy should be linked on the academic integrity website (see recommendation below).

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the Task Force and in consideration of the C-RAC guidelines and literature supporting best practices of online education, the Distance Education Task Force proposes the following recommendations. These recommendations are presented in priority order.

1. Revise the Appalachian Mission and Vision statement to acknowledge the role of Distance Education in expanding accessibility of programs to non-traditional and other students who may not be able to actually travel to campus.
2. Provide standards that would ensure quality across all DE programs, which should include offering professional development with incentives to all faculty engaging in online DE teaching. This will ensure that DE options provide quality of education at least comparable to the campus experience and provide a transformational educational experience whether the course is taught face-to-face, hybrid, or online. We recommend a minimum of \$50,000.00 be allocated each year to support stipends for cohorts of 20 – 25 faculty members who successfully complete a four-week training with staff of CAE and LTS to develop and teach online courses in alignment with the Quality Matters, the “gold standard” for online course design. Follow up support using Faculty Learning Communities is also recommended. Additional resources including staff for CAE and LTS will be necessary to ensure that the Appalachian online courses are at least

comparable to those offered on campus and meet the Appalachian standard for excellence in teaching.

3. Clearly define “online” to include clear percentages of the amount of online versus face-to-face offering. For example, “Online courses are those in which _____% or more of the contact hours take place with faculty and students meeting synchronously or asynchronously in different physical locations.” Online programs may be defined as those in which “_____ % of the courses meet the definition of online above.”
4. Further investigate ways to better utilize DE resources and capitalize on its expertise while engaging faculty and departments who offer online DE courses. Some possible avenues may be to de-centralize authority and give responsibility to departments for growth (enrollments), curriculum, and movement to online courses and programs by developing a systematic process for departments and programs to request going online with courses or programs currently offered face-to-face beyond the current process required by SACS to ensure internal quality control. Decisions concerning which courses or programs should be moved online should be at the department level with strong faculty input. Further study/investigate other DE Models such as the Delta Model housed at NC State University, which brings resources under one entity on campus to better coordinate communications, marketing, branding, etc., to prevent conflicting or confusing information without excluding input from the departments and faculty. To best meet the needs of Appalachian, a combination of these approaches may be studied and developed.
5. Create stronger communication between DE and the various departments on campus by giving faculty and Chairs more voice in DE operations. With a press for growing DE, more campus forums are needed to explore options that will allow departments to express the areas they feel prepared to grow for DE. Reduce isolation of DE from campus by increasing communication between DE staff and program faculty, program directors and department chairs.
6. Require each department to develop a peer review process or some kind of oversight for the development and teaching of online courses while also safe-guarding academic freedom.
7. Put into place effective procedures to ensure that the student who registers in an online course or program is the same student who participates in and completes that course or program and receives the academic credit. Policies should make clear in writing that these processes protect student privacy and notify students at the time of registration or enrollment of any projected additional costs associated with the verification procedures. Policies on academic integrity should explicitly address the unique considerations of online learning.
8. When faculty use the standard course management system (ASULearn and related tools such as Zoom, Google Drive), we recommend that the syllabus include a specific reminder that access to campus IT resources may be revoked if students share login information. There should also be a statement regarding how these systems maintain

privacy of student information. While it is preferable that there be one protected, authenticated, LTS system required for all online courses, faculty who choose to use a non-standard system should be required to document how student authentication and privacy are ensured.

9. Utilize online sessions to help free up classroom space every other week by creating hybrid courses that combine face to face sessions with online. This would require an expansion of DE office staff to assist in a centralized scheduling program for such hybrid classes so that two courses could actually share the same physical classroom space.
10. Create ways to blur the lines between DE and campus students and faculty by addressing the fee structure to allow DE students to opt for paying athletic and other fees that would allow them to take advantage of campus events and activities.
11. Offer more awards to recognize the contributions and accomplishments of DE faculty and students. Encourage DE students to become part of the campus community through establishment of blogs, forums and other online sources.
12. The Task Force does not support the engagement of an online program manager (OPM) to handle online course offerings or programs. It is important to maintain the identity of Appalachian State University in all programs, which entails maintaining the control and integrity of the courses offered through these programs.

Conclusion

The primary charge to this Task Force was to evaluate current Distance Education operations at Appalachian State and to make recommendations for growing our programs by making them more accessible. As a Task Force we believe that preserving the reputation of Appalachian State as an institution of higher education that prides itself on caring, individualized, instruction regardless of the platform or delivery is of tantamount importance in any consideration of growth. While online courses and programs offer greater accessibility and appeal to a wider range of non-traditional students, the Task Force offers these recommendations to strengthen the teaching force and therefore, the programs to better serve our distance education students.

APPENDIX A

MEMBERS OF THE TASK FORCE

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