

**Report of the University Senate
Research and Graduate and Professional Education Committee (RGPEC)
on Charge S-0912
Report and Recommendation on Online Courses in Masters and Professional
Degree programs**

April 2011

Charge S-0912 - Online Courses in Master's and Professional Degree Programs: Review, discuss, and make recommendations on how Rutgers can best utilize online courses in master's and professional degrees. Review the recommendation from the Senate Instruction, Curricula, & Advising Committee on hybrid courses. Evaluate the means by which online courses are set up, and suggest improved means for encouraging Rutgers departments and schools to take advantage of the availability of online, distance-learning, and hybrid courses.

Note: there is a concurrent charge to the Senate's Instruction, Curricula, and Advising Committee, Charge S-1015, on Online Education at Rutgers, as follows: Survey the existing state of online education at Rutgers, and identify issues and challenges. Respond to Senate Executive Committee by April 2011.

Background: The Senate has increasingly been charged with reflecting upon issues related to online course management, hybrid courses, and now, fully online courses. Because graduate and professional students are often engaged in professional activities that make online learning particularly appealing, and because the financial environment in which the university now operates creates space and time constraints that are occasionally best met through online or hybrid instruction, it has become important to reflect upon the implications of these developments for graduate and professional education at Rutgers. The Research, and Graduate and Professional Education Committee (RGPEC) was asked to explore these issues to: gain a better sense of how online learning is being used in graduate and professional degree programs currently; to address some of the issues that are of concern to faculty, staff and students; and to make recommendations on how to best utilize online learning while guarding against potential erosion of teaching and learning standards.

The committee finds that online courses are extremely useful in many of our professional programs, and that they could, with appropriate support, further enhance students' time to completion and general satisfaction with their programs in appropriate contexts. Online courses are not appropriate in all contexts, and each department and school should be free to incorporate or reject online courses with a view towards optimizing the teaching of, and learning by, its students. Significantly, online courses have limitations that run counter to the logic of revenue generation: they are highly labor-intensive for faculty, and they require significant pedagogical and technical support. It would be unwise in the extreme to support online courses for financial reasons alone. The committee recommends that mechanisms (budgetary and otherwise) be defined to provide sufficient technical and pedagogical support to faculty and students interested in online courses, particularly in the context of professional education, where such courses have an increasingly important role.

Data collection: In responding to this charge, an RGPEC subcommittee sought information and data from the following sources: Senate reports on Charges [S-0318 \(on the status of course management systems, September 2005\)](#) and [S-0806 \(on hybrid courses, October 2009\)](#), the current Academic Support Policy, the Off-campus Credit Support Policy, and materials gathered from the various schools on the number of online courses they have run and their enrollments since Winter 2010. The full RGPEC met with a number of key informants who could provide a fuller picture of the infrastructural issues, financial dimensions, and pedagogical issues over the course of 2009-2010, bearing in mind not only issues related to online instruction

but also the general needs of part-time and non-residential students. Several members of the committee have direct experience with online courses and were able to provide input from the vantage point of engaged faculty.

- Dean Jorge Schement - Dean of the School of Communication, Information, & Technology –NB
- Dr. William Firestone from GSE – Educational Theory, Policy, & Administration
- Dr. Silvia Muller from SC&I – Division of Continuous Education and Outreach
- Dr. Claire McInerney from SC&I – Library & Information Science.

Considerations:

- Under what circumstances are online courses useful in graduate and professional programs?
- How might departments determine the pedagogical soundness of online courses?
- What are the maximum enrollments that should be allowed?
- What support infrastructures should be in place for faculty development and assistance for the creation of online courses?
- What support infrastructures should be in place for students taking online courses or enrolled in online programs?
- Are there any concerns about the university supporting multiple course management systems? How should this be addressed? Over what timeframe?

In the course of wide-ranging discussions, issues concerning online courses tended to break down according to a variety of issues and perspectives. For administrators encouraging faculty to consider online courses, as well as for staff providing technical assistance, the budgeting structure for rewarding units for their commitment to providing online courses is a matter of considerable concern. Faculty tended to be more concerned about the practicality of multiple, competing online platforms and the many pedagogical and technical issues that arise when attempting online teaching. Many are skeptical of the utility of such courses for the kinds of training they provide and are wary that the vigorous promotion of online courses will intrude into their freedom to teach in the mode they prefer and find effective. Other faculty members, particularly in the professional schools, find that the online format serves students extremely well for highly standardized required courses. Those with a great deal of experience teaching such courses noted the very considerable faculty labor they require. Students seem to find the provision of multiple options appealing, but can be less enthusiastic where they do not feel themselves to have a choice as to whether they will take online courses, as opposed to conventional classroom courses. Experienced and mature students facing constraints of time and geography can be very appreciative of the accessibility online courses provide, and may be particularly adept at taking advantage of them.

Recommendations:

- 1. Implement the recommendations included in the Senate [response to Charge S-0318](#) (on the status of course management systems, September 2005) immediately.**

As adjustments to the management systems and the budgeting related to online courses are implemented (in part in response to the Senate report on Charge S-0318 on course management systems), many of the concerns raised by administrators and staff about the problems created by competing platforms with rather different budgetary implications may be resolved. However, the committee would like to note that, until the issues raised by the Senate and responded to in the [report on Charge S-0318](#) are resolved, a consistent and now well understood set of problems will continue. Therefore, our first recommendation is that the recommendations made in that report be implemented quickly.

- 2. Implement a mechanism by which technical support can be provided, and best practices shared more openly by those who have taught online courses via many avenues including, but not limited to, literature, training materials and programs, and open-source platforms. Promote these avenues consistently across the University, and provide appropriate support and resources in order to identify underlying pedagogical issues relating to online courses.**

As those problems are resolved, it will be important to find ways of using at least part of the revenue generated by online courses to support the technical and, perhaps more importantly, pedagogical needs of faculty developing online courses. While faculty are stretched for time, it nevertheless would be useful for them to share best practices and to provide input on how online platforms can serve them and the students better. Existing training tends to focus on course-management systems rather than provide faculty with opportunities to explore their pedagogical insights and problems with one another. In our discussions, we consistently found that the questions of how to assess the effectiveness of such courses and how to tailor our pedagogy to the platform and vice-versa were not addressed as fully as we would have liked. This is, in part, because concerns about budgets and platforms have often driven discussions rather than debates about pedagogy.

- 3. Clarify how revenue from online courses is being divided and distributed.**

There is little clarity on how revenue from online courses is divided among units, particularly when a student in one unit takes courses offered in another. All division of revenue should either follow the current norms for conventional classroom courses or be justified by mutual agreement among the units. There needs to be a clear rationale for the division of revenue, and there must be transparency.

- 4. Replace aging and outdated infrastructure as soon as budgetary constraints will allow, and add additional student support systems to address issues as they arise.**

Very little infrastructure appears to be in place to meet the needs of students taking part in online courses. In tandem with the development of more online courses, it is important that support structures geared not only to faculty but also to students be considered. Budgeting for such support will also be necessary. Students enrolling in such courses should be able to make use of online or telephone assistance in order to overcome technical problems they may encounter, as it is unlikely that the teaching faculty will be able to assist them.

- 5. Preserve small class size when considering online alternatives to make certain that Rutgers maintains a high quality of teaching. Exercise caution to avoid overburdening teaching assistants who oversee these courses.**

While different courses undoubtedly make different labor demands on faculty and entail differing degrees of direct student support, the general pattern among programs with relatively long experience with such courses suggests that a class size of 15 to 25 is optimal. Units considering online courses should be discouraged from thinking of online courses as a replacement for large lecture courses unless a model can be developed that provides close oversight of a small number of students in sections. Because this mode of teaching is time consuming, units should be cautious about overloading teaching assistants with online labor in such sections, which may well be more demanding than conventional course sections. In balance, however, the experience that graduate students gain in their exposure to online teaching may serve them well in a job market in which such skills are likely to be increasingly valued.

6. Online Courses should be created and maintained by the University and the units for their teaching and learning potential.

Our discussions tended to reinforce many of the findings of the previous Senate report on hybrid courses, in particular the observation that the principal reason for developing an online course should be for its “teaching and learning potential” and it should “never be economically driven nor should it be dictated by the lack of classroom space”.

7. Rutgers should be forward-looking, and should consider joining a research consortium.

There is great value to expansion of such courses both for students in New Jersey and beyond our borders. A forward-looking approach to online courses that draws upon the considerable experience of units already engaged in online teaching is in order. Rutgers should consider following the lead of many other universities in joining a consortium such as American Distance Education Consortium (which includes the University of California, the University of Illinois, and the University of Maryland) to facilitate information sharing, development of cooperative agreements, and the pursuit of grants related to online learning.

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