

Distance Learning: Policy & Recommendations
April 3, 2008

As charged by the College Senate, the Committee on Distance Learning (an ad hoc group composed of members of the Committee on Instruction, Committee on Technology and other faculty and staff experienced in distance learning) met throughout the Fall 2007 and Spring 2008 semesters to examine the matter of distance learning at our college and develop a distance learning policy for SUNY-Oneonta. Our overall approach to developing the proposed policy was to: 1) keep it as simple and straightforward as possible, and 2) as much as possible, treat distance learning like any other method of instruction used on the campus. After much thought, discussion, and consultation of colleagues, our study culminated in the attached policy draft.

There were some issues that the Committee at this time felt unable to adequately address in the policy. They are important issues though that do need to be dealt with by the College Senate. Therefore, in addition to the proposed policy, the Committee on Distance Learning also makes the following recommendations.

1. The College should investigate a plan and procedure for proctoring exams in distance learning formats.
2. The College should consider what needs there exist for faculty training in distance learning formats and ways to promote such training to faculty.
3. The College should consider needs of faculty in teaching distance learning courses (for example, Internet access, especially for those who may teach extensively in distance learning formats), costs incurred by faculty in teaching distance learning courses, and developing funds to help with meeting such needs and costs.
4. The proposed policy asserts that a “comprehensive review of the distance learning policy and process should be conducted on a regular basis by the College Senate.” It is recommended that this be done by an ad hoc committee with a composition similar to the current Committee on Distance Learning, i.e., members of the Committee on Instruction, Committee on Technology and other faculty and staff experienced in distance learning.

Respectfully submitted by the Committee on Distance Learning:

Brian Beitzel, Educational Psychology & Counseling
Jennifer Bueche, Human Ecology
Amy Crouse-Powers, Center for Academic Development & Enrichment
Lisa Curch, Sociology (Committee Chair)
Mary Ann Dowdell, Human Ecology
Jim Greenberg, Teaching, Learning & Technology Center
Orlando Legname, Music
Eileen Morgan-Zayachek, English

Distance Learning Policy Draft April 2008

Introduction & General Principles

It is recognized that significant changes are occurring in the context for learning in our society, with telecommunications making access to college courses and programs widely available, and the consequent need to balance access and quality (Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education, 1995). The role of distance learning at the State University of New York – College at Oneonta is one that is connected to the mission of the College, and involves providing access to quality educational opportunities that extend beyond traditional offerings.

Definitions

Distance learning is defined as instruction between a teacher and students when they are separated by physical distance and communication is accomplished by one or more technological media (American Association of University Professors, 2007; Oregon Network for Education, 2000). Distance learning programs are degree, certificate, and minor programs in which course work in the program is available to students in technologically-based formats. Distance learning courses are classes, taught for credit or otherwise required for a program, in which students are separated, in the majority or entirety of the course, by time and/or space from the instructor and/or the campus from which the course originates. Modes of instruction and communication are by technological means, now known or hereafter developed. The policies and procedures outlined here will apply regardless of the format or method of distance learning.

Application & Purpose

In general, distance learning should adhere to existing policies of the Board of Trustees of the State University of New York, the College at Oneonta and the United University Professions. The same academic standards for quality and other requirements for traditional courses apply to distance education as well. As an instructional activity, faculty and academic departments maintain primary responsibility for determining the policies and practices of the College with respect to distance learning. It is further affirmed that faculty and academic departments retain the primary role in the development, provision, and control of distance learning courses and programs. Therefore the rules governing distance learning should be approved by the College Senate before being officially adopted by the institution.

Consistent with the College's Comprehensive Plan, the primary purposes of distance learning options and the development of guidelines in this document are:

- 1) *Academic quality* – Institutional support of distance learning options works towards the particular goal of promoting “*an environment that encourages exploration of new and existing technologies to enhance teaching, learning, and research*” (SUNY-Oneonta, 2006). This document makes clear the extension of educational quality standards to distance learning.
- 2) *Quality of Campus Life* – although distance learning options involve separation by time and/or space from the instructor and/or campus, such endeavors extend the resources of the College to create a supportive teaching and learning environment on the campus and off, especially in

pursuit of the goal of continuing “to provide faculty, students, and staff access to contemporary technology and effective training opportunities in the applications of technology” (SUNY-Oneonta, 2006). This document works to ensure that all parties involved have those resources available to them.

Though the technologies used to deliver distance education may change frequently, these applications, goals, and responsibilities remain, and this document will continue to provide general guidance on various issues involved in the offering of distance learning courses.

History

The following policies and procedures reflect the work of the Committee on Distance Learning. The Committee was formed in 2007 by a resolution of the College Senate at the behest of the Provost and convened from 2007-2008 in order to develop these guidelines for the College in regard to its distance learning offerings. The committee consisted of faculty and professional staff representing the Committee on Instruction, the Committee on Technology, faculty currently involved in distance learning, and staff with experience and expertise in technology and distance learning.

Committee Members

Brian Beitzel, Educational Psychology & Counseling
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- SUNY-Oneonta. (2006). *Comprehensive College Plan*. SUNY-Oneonta. Retrieved November 8, 2007 from <http://www.oneonta.edu/general/ccp.asp>.
- Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education. (1995). “Principles of Good Practice in Electronically Offered Academic Degree and Certificate Programs.” Retrieved October 30, 2007 from <http://www.wiche.edu/telecom/Projects/balancing/principles.htm>.

Academic Issues

Academic Calendar

The ending date of a distance learning course cannot be later than the last day of finals week in any given semester and final grades must be submitted no later than 48 hours after the last on-campus final exam, unless approved by the appropriate academic dean, the department chair, and the registrar. Vacation schedules for distance learning courses originating in Oneonta will correspond with Oneonta campus vacations unless otherwise approved by the appropriate academic dean and the department chair.

Accreditation Issues

Directors of accredited programs are expected to notify the registrar of any rules or policies that would prevent their students from earning credit for distance learning courses.

Admissions

Admissions to distance learning courses will not be distinct from the requirements for admissions to on-campus courses.

Assessment

Assessment of distance learning courses will be conducted in the same fashion as face-to-face courses, with exceptions only for those items that do not apply to a distance learning format.

Course Approval & Implementation

Existing Courses - Because the responsibility for the quality of instruction lies with the faculty, departmental approval only is required to offer an existing course in a distance learning format.

New Courses - Any new distance learning course not already in the College catalog must be approved through the standard curriculum review process.

Course Attribute - When submitting scheduled courses to the Registrar's office, departments must indicate which courses will be delivered in a distance learning format so that the "OL" attribute can be indicated.

Course Support - To ensure sufficient technology hardware, software, and support, academic technology support should be notified by the department, well in advance, of all distance learning courses to be offered each semester.

Course Design & Development

The instructional design of the course is the responsibility of the faculty member. In general, faculty should use institutionally supported technologies for developing and delivering distance learning courses. Resources are available on campus for faculty who seek guidance in developing distance learning courses. Faculty who are developing their first distance learning course are strongly encouraged to contact the Information Technology Help Desk, who will connect the instructor with the appropriate academic technology support personnel.

Transfer Credit

For current students, credits from distance learning courses transferring into an Oneonta degree program are subject to approval by the department chair of the program. Pre-approval is strongly urged.

For students transferring into an Oneonta degree program, credits from distance learning courses will be evaluated in the same way in which other courses are evaluated.

Faculty Issues

Faculty who teach distance learning courses have all of the same rights granted to members of the College faculty, such as academic freedom. They also have the same professional responsibilities.

Protection of Course Materials

Anyone wanting to access distance learning course material must obtain documented permission from the faculty member.

Teaching Appointments

For courses and programs which are taught in a distance learning format, it may be appropriate for some faculty to meet their professional obligations and responsibilities electronically rather than through physical presence on campus, depending on the needs of the department. Such an electronic presence would permit departments to make distance faculty appointments.

For all academic and professional employees, the assignment of distance learning courses will be voluntary, except in rare circumstances, unless specified at the time of hire. Faculty will not be required to participate in distance learning courses without adequate preparation and training.

Teaching distance learning courses will be considered in a manner equivalent to traditional courses in the processes of reappointment, promotion, tenure, and discretionary salary decisions.

Distance learning courses and programs should not reduce on-campus programs or faculty. The use of distance learning technology will not be used to reduce, eliminate, or consolidate full-time faculty positions at the College.

Training

Any faculty member teaching a distance learning course for the first time is strongly encouraged to and can receive training in the development and implementation of the course. If new technologies are adopted by the College, further training will be offered. Faculty interested in receiving training can contact the Information Technology Help Desk.

Workload & Compensation

Distance learning courses may be included as part of the faculty member's regular load or may constitute an overload.

It is highly recommended that a course be fully developed before being implemented. Based on the exceptional involvement in preparation required for distance learning course development, this is appropriate justification for a course load reduction, per policy in the College Faculty Handbook. Therefore, faculty members teaching a distance learning course for the first time or a course that needs to be substantially revised should be provided a course load reduction to properly prepare the course. This reduction should be provided prior to the offering of the course and may be supplemented with an additional reduction during the first term the course is taught. If a course load reduction is not available, the instructor can alternatively be financially compensated for an overload or through a technology grant or fellowship.

In the event that the College makes any modifications to the distance learning course(s) and/or delivery systems which increase or substantially alter the faculty member's workload, the college shall be required to notify the faculty at least 90 days prior to the effective date of the modifications.

Institutional Issues

Institutional Governance & Policy Review

The rules governing distance learning, and any future changes to them, will be approved by vote of the College Senate, and then officially recommended to the College. This policy, and any subsequent amendments, will be published and distributed to all concerned at the College (e.g., inclusion in the Faculty Handbook).

A comprehensive review of the distance learning policy and process should be conducted on a regular basis by the College Senate. An important component of the review process should involve policy planning, which includes anticipation of upcoming needs of students and faculty, as well as consideration of growth and development issues (e.g., how to mediate growth).

Institutional Support for Technology

It is important that the institution demonstrates a commitment to ongoing technical support for both faculty and students. It is expected that the institution will work to maintain technical and service reliability, to keep pace with technological and pedagogical advancements, and to continue to provide various means of support as technology and learning modes change.

Personnel from the traditional institutional structure (e.g., Teaching, Learning & Technology Center, Academic Computing Services, etc.) ensure all previously stated services, resources, and support for all students and faculty engaged in distance learning will be provided and available, at no additional cost to the instructor.

Intellectual Property & Copyright

Regarding intellectual property and copyright for distance learning course materials, the definitions, guidelines, and policies of the Board of Trustees of the State University of New York shall be followed.

Student Issues & Services

Services for students taking distance learning courses will be provided according to the policies and procedures of the offices and facilities providing those services. These services include, but are not limited to, academic advisement, bookstore, disability services, enrollment/registration, financial aid, library, technical help, and tutoring. Faculty are encouraged to apprise students of available services. It is expected that personnel in these services will make appropriate and reasonable efforts to reach out to and accommodate distance learning students, as is done for on-campus students.

Academic Integrity

Students are expected to comply with current College policy on Academic Integrity. Faculty are encouraged to familiarize their students with the policy and the concept of academic integrity.

Training

It is important to ensure that students understand how the course interface works so that the technology does not present students with unnecessary barriers to learning. Therefore, instructors teaching distance learning courses should provide their students with an orientation, either in person or through the distance learning format, to the particular interface being used.

Teaching Issues

Faculty members should be involved in the oversight of distance education courses to the same extent as in other courses with regard to factors such as course development and approval, selection of qualified faculty to teach, pedagogical determinations about appropriate class size, and oversight of final course offerings by the appropriate faculty and department to ensure conformity with previously established traditions of course quality and relevance to programs.

Course Completion

Access and availability to distance learning courses after completion should be similar to traditional courses. Existing College policies concerning deadlines for course completion and incompletes should apply equally to distance learning courses.

Distance learning courses will be stored in an "archived" electronic format for at least one year following their completion. Faculty can request access to these archived formats at anytime through the Information Technology Help Desk. Existing College policy on access to these archives will apply.

Evaluation

The College's standard course evaluation form will be provided within the course. Questions and items that do not apply to a distance learning format may be removed. Additional questions and items specific to the course modality may be added by the instructor or academic unit. Distance learning courses should be evaluated using existing course evaluation policy and procedures.

Office Hours/Faculty Presence

A faculty member teaching a distance learning course shall conduct the normally expected total number of virtual “office hours.” “Office hours” incorporated into the distance learning course will be considered to be part of an instructor’s contractual obligation.

Faculty presence is an integral component of quality instruction, as well as a leading indicator of student satisfaction. Faculty will make clear to students the days or times that students can expect that the instructor will be active or present in the course.

Selection of Materials

The College policies applicable to faculty-authored materials in traditional classroom instruction should apply equally to distance learning formats. These policies would include: a) Faculty ownership of scholarly/aesthetic works, including lecture, course handouts and syllabi and b) Faculty control of methods of presentation and selection of course materials.

Technical Support

SUNY Oneonta is responsible for the technological delivery of distance learning courses. This support is considered part of the usual and customary equipment and resources available to support all faculty teaching. This includes ensuring that:

Distance learning courses should not drain campus resources and not deter students from coming to campus.

Basic and necessary technology and equipment are identified and in place to develop and teach distance learning courses.

Resources for distance learning represent the current state-of-the-art technology available.

The College provides appropriate and timely training and technical support for faculty members.

Continued technical and curricular training courses for potential users will be available as new technologies become available.

The College will provide appropriate forms of assistance and support personnel to faculty members to develop distance learning courses.