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Subject: distance education policy proposal
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Recent deliberations have resulted in a revised distance education policy proposal for consideration by the Academic Senate. I participated in that committee composed of a majority of individuals with neither past experience nor planned future experience in distance education courses.

As a distance education professional involved as a designer, developer and facilitator of online courses and holding a graduate degree specific to online teaching and learning, my philosophy toward an appropriate distance education policy is substantively different from other members on the committee. I suggested my alternative view to the committee but the consensus was to take a different approach, which has been forwarded to the Senate Executive Committee.

Modern technologies make it possible to teach differently than in the past. These new teaching methods are often misunderstood and viewed with suspicion or skepticism. The irony is that it's these very technologies that make it possible for online courses to be more carefully scrutinized than our traditional face-to-face instruction and the temptation exists to hold them to a higher standard than traditional courses.

Much of the committee's focus was on the importance of maintaining quality and managing our limited resources for expanding distance education efforts at HSU. I agree that we owe our students nothing short of a high-quality education whether in a traditional classroom or as a technology-mediated learning experience. However, the intense concern with managing limited resources has meant overlooking the potential benefits to the university and our students.

The WASC *Good Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs* document reminds us that the "well-established essentials of institutional quality found in regional accreditation standards are applicable to the emergent forms of learning; much of the detail of their content would find application in any learning environment." We need to remain consistent with these WASC standards as we embark on distance education initiatives.

The university already has systems and customary best practices in place that have been shaped over time both to meet accreditation standards and to ensure a quality educational experience for the traditional student in the traditional classroom. Existing best practices, such as those described in the WASC document and the "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education" (A. Chickering and Z. Gamson, 1987) recognize key elements of a quality education regardless of the delivery mechanism. In an effort to move forward to improve accessibility through distance education opportunities, the university must *update* its *existing* best practices to meet the changing needs of faculty and students as they explore new ways of teaching and

learning. Therefore, I disagree with the committee's proposed policy that calls upon *new* procedures for proposing, evaluating, or delivering distance education courses. Even though the WASC document is cited as justification for portions of the proposed policy (2a, 2b), such requirements for course proposals should apply for *all* courses (not just distance education courses).

Due to issues unique to varying modalities and ever-changing technologies, a single policy cannot address all issues related to distance education offerings. A few practices needing modification have been specified in the committee's proposed policy, however, these are merely representative issues that need attention. By singling them out, it appears that this is a comprehensive list. *All* university decisions, policies, and practices need to be updated to provide a solid infrastructure to support distance education initiatives.

The approach I have recommended is consistent with the one taken by our "neighbor" campus, CSU Chico. Chico has a very robust and well integrated distance education presence, so I was particularly interested in the approach at that campus. When I inquired of Debra Barger (Dean, Center for Regional and Continuing Education) of the "distance education policy" at Chico, her reply was as I suspected:

"We really don't have a distance education policy per se at CSU, Chico. That is, we have many academic policies which are applied to distance education, but few policies that are unique to distance education. Curricular approval, program reviews, and accreditation are all areas for which policy exists that apply universally regardless whether such programs are conducted face to face or via distance education."

Similarly, both San Marcos and East Bay also have no distance education policy. It's worth noting that East Bay has been offering fully-online degree programs for several years.

While I agree that HSU needs a Distance Education Coordinator to help coordinate the updating of existing university practices and heighten awareness of issues related to distance education, I have a different view of the role of that position. I disagree with the committee's recommendation regarding the standing committee of the University Curriculum Committee and the distance education coordinator. First, I don't think it should be part of the UCC, and second, I don't believe that the committee or the coordinator should be "prioritizing the use of personnel and facilities needed for development or delivery of DE courses," but instead develop the *policy* that will guide the appropriate administrator in prioritizing resources, should that become necessary.

I suggested that "the Office of Distance Education, working with an advisory committee comprised mostly of individuals engaged in distance education, will collaborate with departments, committees, and other entities to update existing policies and procedures so that both on-campus and distance education courses can be managed through the same processes." Ideally, one day there would be no need for an "Office of Distance Education" because traditional and distance education instructional delivery will be so well integrated.

I am also concerned about the Distance Education Coordinator's role in course proposals (4c) "...the Distance Education Coordinator will comment on the availability of resources that will be

used to successfully mount the course.” Will the Coordinator be placed in the position of saying that there are insufficient resources to develop the course or distance education initiative? For online courses, how will the resources be measured? How can the resources be determined to be adequate or inadequate when the amount of resources being used for (competing) “hybrid” courses is not in the equation? I think it is more appropriate for the Distance Education coordinator to be advised of the plans to offer the course in a specified delivery format, then advocate for additional resources, if necessary, to meet the need.

Committee members made eloquent arguments supporting their positions when I raised my concerns. However, I think for distance education initiatives to move forward apace at HSU, it’s critical to begin to establish a culture at the university which removes skepticism, suspicion, and misunderstanding of distance education courses--where these new courses are seen as a positive addition to the Humboldt experience. Even though the revised policy proposal offers significant improvements over the previous version, I believe it falls short in the areas I’ve indicated in establishing the climate necessary for Humboldt to successfully advance distance education initiatives.

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