Project South Texas
Academic Administration Working Groups
FINAL Report

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Working Group Name	Distance Education
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION

Distance Education Working Group Philosophy Statement

The Distance Education working group recommends a framework that leverages next generation technologies and customized learning to expand education access opportunities in the Rio Grande Valley and the rest of the Americas. The recommended framework will rely on an institutional foundation of best practices in distance education, local/ international partnerships, leverages innovative educational trends, and supports faculty/students with state-of-the-art technology and infrastructure to promote academic rigor, teaching excellence, and research innovation in distance learning.

Executive Summary

The Distance Education Working Group presents general concept to strengthen the foundation for a 21st century university, prepare students to become lifelong learners through online/blended education opportunities, and support faculty through streamlined academic and development programs that promote teaching effectiveness, facilitate scholarly work, and leverage innovative technologies. A concise narrative of the Distance Education Working Group's general goals/guiding principles aimed to fulfill its philosophy follows.

The critical role of online/hybrid education at UTRGV makes it imperative to establish an academic support unit/center and physical facilities for distance education development and delivery, fulfill support/capacitation needs of faculty/students, and provide appropriate innovative infrastructure to sustain a comprehensive distance education support team to facilitate excellence in online/hybrid teaching/learning. The distance education support unit/center would leverage teams at existing campuses to support services for faculty/students: instructional design, instructional technology support, academic programs support and advisement, online supplemental instruction/ tutoring services, library resources, admissions, and financial aid related to distance teaching/learning. A governance process should be part of a distance education support unit, established with stakeholders for the strategic planning of UTRGV's Distance Education.

The distance education support entity may lead the development and adoption of institutional guidelines to facilitate availability and adequate delivery of online/hybrid courses and instruction to promote UTRGV student success through quality online/hybrid education. These guidelines will help stakeholders ensure that online & hybrid course offerings are accessible to students, meet a minimum set of quality and academic rigor standards, and ensure that faculty members teaching these courses are properly capacitated and equipped to teach in online or hybrid environments.

Suggested General Guidelines:
- Establish a uniform and streamlined process to design, develop, and deliver online course offerings

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- Institutionalize a continuous quality improvement program to design, develop, and implement distance education courses/academic programs with high-quality standards and exemplary academic rigor. This program would incorporate peer reviewers, subject matter experts, and qualified online instructional design/development staff.
- Offer online/hybrid courses with curriculum content faculty designed and developed for this delivery method

Such guideline adoption will require UTRGV to prepare faculty for online instruction through professional development programs, incentives, and support infrastructure to move from traditional to hybrid/online instruction. A comprehensive professional development plan for UTRGV faculty in online/hybrid teaching and instructional design can be accomplished with focused offerings of faculty workshops, trainings, conferences, and mentoring programs in distance education topics and provide the faculty members with access to "Distance Education Faculty Fellows" that, in collaboration with the distance education support unit, can serve as peer consultants. This would strengthen the philosophy and culture of adopting best practices and quality standards in online/hybrid education. Some focused support areas include:

- Digital skills for online & hybrid teaching
- Online & hybrid course management and communication
- Using Technology to promote active learning and delivering academically rigorous online learning activities
- Building online learning communities and establishing a sense of presence in the online and hybrid environment
- Delivering and facilitating competency-based education in online and hybrid environments

Faculty development will increase online and hybrid course offerings that will reduce time-to-degree and expand access to educational programs and opportunities. Distance education expansion is accomplished by identifying strategic courses for online delivery. Working with stakeholders like College Deans or Department Chairs will aid in identifying specific academic departments that may offer key strategic courses with critical impact on time to graduation for students. These courses may be part of the general education requirement courses or of current or forthcoming online degree/certificate programs.

UTRGV can further leverage online/hybrid course offerings by partnering with local, national, and international communities to expand access to quality education, address community needs, and fulfill industry demands through community outreach initiatives, continuing education, and specialization programs. For instance, educational technology hubs can be strategically placed between metropolitan areas in the RGV. These strategically placed hubs (i.e. community/ public library) may benefit individuals who otherwise would find it difficult to reach different UTRGV campuses and access available online course offerings. To assure that students have multiple options for program completion in a timely fashion, and to ensure program sustainability and growth, we propose that each campus invest in a single building/wing devoted exclusively to half dozen classrooms equipped with audio/visual equipment, easy for anyone to operate and remote interconnect among campuses. Such physical and technological infrastructure will minimize student commute across the RGV and avoid unprofitable small-sized sections intended to meet student graduation needs.

Instructional design/instructional technology support staff in the distance education support unit is essential to sustain and integrate "next generation technologies and customized learning to increase affordability and maximize student success". The proper skill-knowledge combination in this support unit will allow UTRGV to leverage innovative educational trends like immersive simulations, gamification, adaptive learning, competency-based approaches to teaching/learning, Massively Open Online Courses (MOOCs), and other ways to award academic credit for previous learning in distance education.

Because of the aforementioned rigorous online pedagogical practices, academic standards, and resulting student success, several scholarship and grant-funded research opportunities may arise for faculty consideration. The distance education support unit would establish a distance education research support system that conducts, organizes, and facilitates evidenced-based research in online and blended learning for scholarly work and outside funding opportunities.

Furthermore, the distance education support unit would manage a sensible budgeting process for distance education courses and programs' sustainability, such as faculty and academic department incentives. To promote guidelines and best practices adoption, to be good stewards of funds generated by distance learning fees, and to accomplish the goals of this document, the distance education support unit would facilitate funds distribution to the different entities.

FINDINGS

Innovative Initiatives Currently in Place

- Provide personnel and resources to facilitate course design and development, implement instructional technologies, adopt best practices for distance education, and support online students.
- Prepare faculty for online instruction through the implementation of professional development programs that focus on online pedagogy and best practices, incentives, and support as they move from traditional to hybrid and/or online delivery of instruction.
- Test proctoring services for the purposes of distance and blended education

Innovative Initiatives <u>not</u> Currently in Place

- Manage a sensible budgeting process that supports distance education courses and programs' sustainability including incentives/funding for faculty and academic departments involved in online education.
- Institutionalize a continuous quality improvement program designed to ensure that distance education courses and academic programs are designed, developed, and implemented with high-quality standards and exemplary academic rigor.
- Increase online offerings that will reduce time-to-degree, expand access to educational programs, and increase student enrollments.
- Develop institution-wide guidelines that will foster delivery and administration of distance education course offerings.
- Leverage innovative trends that can increase value for the new university and provide innovative ways to award academic credit for previous learning (i.e. MOOCs, competency based programs, etc.).
- Establish adequate infrastructure and facilities that will promote and facilitate the development and delivery of distance education.
- Establish a comprehensive support and services plan for all distance education students. This plan would leverage individuals at existing support units to compile a team dedicated to provide a wide spectrum of support services that range from digital skills training to thrive online, technical support, academic advisement, financial aid support, supplemental instruction, and other student services that are essential for student success in distance education.
- Support and facilitate a distance education research clearinghouse that encourages evidenced-based research and informs practices in online teaching and learning for all disciplines involved in distance learning.
- Partner and/or leverage Continuing Education initiatives to reach the community (local and "to the Americas") and/or fulfill industry demands. Become entrepreneurial by offering Continuing Education and/or Certificate Programs.
- Create a faculty driven distance education advisory board to participate as a stakeholder in the strategic planning that guides the support unit of distance education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Key Recommendations for the Final Report

- Establish a comprehensive distance education support unit with appropriate human resources (knowledge and skills) and proper organizational structure that facilitates the focus on best practices in online teaching and learning, academic rigor, and educational technology support

- o The distance education support unit should reside under the Academic Affairs track to maintain the focus on the educational and instructional issues rather than technology issues
- o Qualified instructional design personnel is essential to provide the necessary support for faculty in the design and development of online and hybrid courses
- o Instructional technology support staff with expertise in educational technologies such as e-portfolios, learning management systems, learning community systems, and other technologies that facilitate teaching and learning is also an essential component for this unit
- Proper technology infrastructure and facilities that will promote and facilitate the development and delivery of distance education
- Develop, promote, and adopt institution-wide guidelines that will foster delivery and administration of distance education course offerings
- Institutionalize a continuous quality improvement program designed to ensure that distance education courses and academic programs are designed, developed, and implemented with high-quality standards and exemplary academic rigor.
- Create a faculty-driven distance education advisory board that participates in the campus-wide strategic planning of distance education and collaborates with the distance education support unit

Required Actions for Implementation – Fall 2015

- Secure State Authorization from accrediting agencies to offer Distance Education courses in different states across the United States
- Implementing new processes as described in the executive summary and Appendix A
- Strengthening human capital by identifying the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to support and sustain distance education
- Manage a sensible budgeting process that fully supports the sustainability of the distance education unit, online courses and programs, and provides incentives to online faculty and academic departments (i.e. provide funds to promote proper design and development of online courses through course releases or faculty stipends)

Possible Consultations

- Engage in comprehensive discussions and meetings with individuals from the UT System Institute for Transformational Learning. The Distance Education group has shared the list of recommendations to the ITL members, and some feedback has been provided. We will be incorporating this feedback as we move forward.

- Reach out to the Education Advisory Board (www.eab.com) to obtain a customized research report that focuses in the areas of distance education and supporting distance education initiatives in a multi-campus setting.

Appendices

Appendix A
Distance Education Working Group – Goals/Guiding Principles

1. Develop institution-wide guidelines and operational planning that will foster delivery and administration of distance education course offerings.
   Guiding Principles Associated with #1

   - Streamline academic and administrative programs and re-design processes to increase productivity and promote a student- and service-centered mode of operation.
   - Develop a Medical School of the first class, with outstanding undergraduate and graduate medical education, public health, health professional degrees and clinical research, to improve the health of the community.
   - Leverage the size, strength, and excellence of the University of Texas System and its fifteen outstanding institutions to shorten the time it takes to achieve these goals.

2. Prepare faculty for online instruction through the implementation of professional development, incentives, and support as they move from traditional to hybrid and/or online delivery of instruction.
   Guiding Principles Associated with #2

   - Streamline academic and administrative programs and re-design processes to increase productivity and promote a student- and service-centered mode of operation.
   - Develop programmatic strength in the areas of science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and health.

3. Increase online offerings that will reduce time-to-degree, expand access to educational programs, and increase student enrollments.
   Guiding Principles Associated with #3

   - Fully integrate next generation technology and customized learning to increase affordability and maximize student success.
   - Develop programmatic strength in the areas of science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and health.

4. Provide personnel and resources to facilitate course design and development, implement instructional technologies, adopt best practices for distance education, and support online students.
   Guiding Principles Associated with #4

   - Streamline academic and administrative programs and re-design processes to increase productivity and promote a student- and service-centered mode of operation.
   - Employ the highest quality faculty members and staff who pursue global excellence in teaching, research, healthcare and service.

5. Institutionalize a continuous quality improvement program designed to ensure that distance education courses and academic programs are designed, developed, and implemented with high-quality standards and exemplary academic rigor.
   Guiding Principles Associated with #5

- Streamline academic and administrative programs and re-design processes to increase productivity and promote a student- and service-centered mode of operation.
- Develop programmatic strength in the areas of science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and health.
- Develop a Medical School of the first class, with outstanding undergraduate and graduate medical education, public health, health professional degrees and clinical research, to improve the health of the community.

6. Manage a sensible budgeting process that supports distance education courses and programs' sustainability including incentives for faculty and academic departments.

   Guiding Principles Associated with #6

   - Streamline academic and administrative programs and re-design processes to increase productivity and promote a student- and service-centered mode of operation.

7. Leverage innovative trends that can increase value for the new university and provide innovative ways to award academic credit for previous learning (i.e. MOOCs, competency based programs, etc.).

   Guiding Principles Associated with #7

   - Fully integrate next generation technology and customized learning to increase affordability and maximize student success.
   - Become a global leader in higher education, health education, bio-medical research, emerging technology and preparing students to be lifelong learners.
   - Promote innovation and knowledge discovery with business and industry that will lead to job growth and improvements in the quality of the region's workforce.
   - Promote arts and humanities programs to produce state, national and world leaders who are bicultural, bi-lingual, and bi-literate.
   - Develop programmatic strength in the areas of science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and health.

8. Partner and/or leverage Continuing Education initiatives to reach the community (local and "to the Americas") and/or fulfill industry demands. Become entrepreneurial by offering Continuing Education and/or Certificate Programs.

   Guiding Principles Associated with #8

   - Promote access to postsecondary education to a diverse student body to become one of the largest and most successful Hispanic-serving institutions in the U.S.A.
   - Promote arts and humanities programs to produce state, national and world leaders who are bicultural, bi-lingual, and bi-literate.
   - Build on the excellent economic activity and strength of the State of Texas and benefit from the State's leadership in the world.
   - Provide a leadership role in fostering economic and community partnerships to help solve local, state, national, and global problems.
   - Promote innovation and knowledge discovery with business and industry that will lead to job growth and improvements in the quality of the region's workforce.
   - Serve as a "Gateway to the Americas" by cultivating partnerships with global leaders in education, health, research and other strategic, high-growth industries.
   - Leverage the size, strength, and excellence of the University of Texas System and its fifteen outstanding institutions to shorten the time it takes to achieve these goals.

9. Establish a comprehensive support and services plan for all distance education students. This plan would leverage individuals at existing support units to compile a team dedicated to provide a wide spectrum of support services that range from digital skills training to thrive online, technical support, academic advisement, financial aid support, supplemental instruction, and other student services that are essential for student success in distance education.

   Guiding Principles Associated with #9

   - Streamline academic and administrative programs and re-design processes to increase productivity and promote a student- and service-centered mode of operation.
   - Leverage the size, strength, and excellence of the University of Texas System and its fifteen outstanding institutions to shorten the time it takes to achieve these goals.

10. Establish adequate infrastructure and facilities that will promote and facilitate the development and delivery of distance education.

    Guiding Principles Associated with #10

    - Streamline academic and administrative programs and re-design processes to increase productivity and promote a student- and service-centered mode of operation.
    - Promote arts and humanities programs to produce state, national and world leaders who are bicultural, bi-lingual, and bi-literate.
    - Develop programmatic strength in the areas of science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and health.
    - Develop a Medical School of the first class, with outstanding undergraduate and graduate medical education, public health, health professional degrees and clinical research, to improve the health of the community.
    - Build on the excellent economic activity and strength of the State of Texas and benefit from the State's leadership in the world.
    - Provide a leadership role in fostering economic and community partnerships to help solve local, state, national, and global problems.
    - Leverage the size, strength, and excellence of the University of Texas System and its fifteen outstanding institutions to shorten the time it takes to achieve these goals.

11. Support and facilitate a distance education research clearinghouse that encourages evidenced-based research and informs practices in online teaching and learning for all disciplines involved in distance learning.

    Guiding Principles Associated with #11

    - Promote innovation and knowledge discovery with business and industry that will lead to job growth and improvements in the quality of the region's workforce.
    - Build a hub for inventions and intellectual property that will lead to economic and community prosperity and an improved quality of life for the region, the State, the nation and our world.
    - Become a global leader in higher education, health education, bio-medical research, emerging technology and preparing students to be lifelong learners.

12. Create a faculty driven distance education advisory board to participate as a stakeholder in the strategic planning that guides the support unit of distance education.

    Guiding Principles Associated with #12

- Fully integrate next generation technology and customized learning to increase affordability and maximize student success.
- Streamline academic and administrative programs and re-design processes to increase productivity and promote a student- and service-centered mode of operation.
- Pursue applied and translational research to address critical local, state, national, and global needs.
- Provide a leadership role in fostering economic and community partnerships to help solve local, state, national, and global problems.
- Leverage the size, strength, and excellence of the University of Texas System and its fifteen outstanding institutions to shorten the time it takes to achieve these goals.

Color Key

Blue – Academic Affairs Track

Orange – Outreach, Entrepreneurship, Miscellaneous Track

Green – Support Services track