General Findings of the Academic Affairs Committee regarding On-line Instruction at UCA:

CURRENT USE OF ON-LINE INSTRUCTION:

Prevalence of on-line instruction varies greatly from college to college with Music, Art, and Communication rarely utilizing it at all. Liberal Arts departments differ within their college, but course offerings and student numbers are still low. By far the greatest numbers of on-line students are in the Education, Business, and Health-Science fields. UCA currently does not offer an undergraduate degree on-line besides the RN-to-BSN program in Nursing. However there are several graduate degrees or certificates that may be completed on-line. These degrees as well as the number of individual classes by department are available on the attached table at the end of this report.

(THIS REPORT IS ATTACHED TO THE EMAIL AND ENTITLED “ON-LINE ENROLLMENT BREAKDOWN”)

FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATION ATTITUDES TOWARDS ON-LINE METHODOLOGY:

FACULTY—There is generally an agreement that on-line course-delivery has an appropriate role in Higher Education despite some disagreement over what that role is. Interest in expanding course offerings is greatest among faculty in Natural Science & Mathematics, Business, and Health-Science. Yet lack of use does not indicate antagonism. Very few faculty members argued against the use of on-line methods on principle even if they did not wish to teach on-line themselves. Additionally, many of the faculty most familiar with on-line instruction repeatedly stated that UCA’s strength was and should continue to be traditional, in-class instruction. “We do not want to become the University of Phoenix—nor do we wish to compete with them.” Instead the prevailing attitude seems to be one that argues for a targeted application and investment in on-line instruction based on the University’s Strategic Plan, clearly articulated administrative goals, and direct cost-benefit analysis. Departmental control of curriculum and high standards for instructional quality were also stressed.

ADMINISTRATION— The Board of Trustees and the President intend for UCA to become established as the regional leader in public education—therefore competing directly with UALR, AR-Tech, AR-State, and to some extent, UofA. This vision demands UCA engagement in the on-line marketplace in order to attract students and maintain consistent growth. The belief is that online students will: 1) be attracted by programs recognized for quality and by convenience, and 2) provide revenue without the cost associated with on-campus students (revenue which can be used to benefit on-campus facilities). The administration believes that failure to attract on-line students will gradually result in enrollment losses and ultimately impact faculty/staff numbers. The Provost’s Office believes that Faculty control of curriculum and investment in quality-control is crucial for this vision to succeed.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

With these things in mind, this committee recommends the following:

1) The Faculty Senate should create a standing committee, the Faculty Senate Committee for Online Instruction, which will be charged with reviewing the performance of online policies in light of clearly articulated university goals. An annual report concerning the cost-benefit of on-line instruction and technological investment should be made and issued to this committee. This report should be itemized—not merely a summary balance sheet produced by Institutional Research that cannot be tested. Reports are meaningless unless they can be itemized and evaluated in order to improve policy.

Suggested members:

Associate Provost for Instructional Technology, Associate Provost for Finance, Chief IT Officer,  Representative from the Registrar’s Office, Assistant Director of Distance Education (from the IT department), a Representative from the Library, and one Rep from each college (Business, Ed, FAC, Health, LA, NSM) appointed by the Faculty Senate. This would give a balance of 5 Administrators and 7 faculty (counting the Library Rep). It is anticipated that the university may appoint an administrator for online education in the future. If so, then that person would join this committee for a 6/7 ratio.

The Chair would be elected at the first meeting each academic year.

2) Taking into account the Strategic Plan and the Administration’s articulated goals, UCA should develop clear guidelines for the required enrollment, standard pay, and course-expectations for on-line instruction. Such as:

a. Current definitions of what exactly constitutes an online course are varied, confusing, often inaccurately applied and frequently misunderstood by students. The committee recommends that an additional space be created in BANNER which clearly indicates what on-campus participation is required for each class and contains a list (or link to a list) of the required IT hardware for the course. This information should appear WHERE THE STUDENT CHECKS THE BOX TO SIGN UP FOR THE COURSE! The committee feels strongly that putting this information on a separate page or in the fine print is disingenuous and does a disservice to our students. This information should be required of ANY course that has both on-campus/off-campus components. This policy should serve our students and standardize the necessary information they need for clarity and convenience without impacting the ability of departments to market their programs as “online.”

b. Each department should treat its online/hybrid courses the same as their traditional courses regarding pay-scale, quality standards, and enrollment. Online/hybrid courses should require a standard level of enrollment just as on-campus courses are—minimum enrollments should be set and capped appropriately. If a department requires a 12-student minimum to host an on-campus class, then an online/hybrid course should meet the same standards. This also means that an instructor teaching a course as an online/hybrid should receive the same pay and credit towards course-loads as an instructor of similar rank teaching the course on-campus. If Administrative or departmental goals indicate a course should be offered regardless of enrollment, then this course should be offered as an override with an appropriate per-student pay-scale. (i.e.—in our 12-student minimum example above, an instructor who received $3300 for an overload class would receive 1/12th of that amount for each student enrolled up to the required minimum). It should be understood that there should be no inherent difference in regards to tenure/promotion between online/hybrid instruction and on-campus instruction.

c. On-line instruction should not provide a means of bypassing the values inherent in CORE classes. For example, FYS courses emphasize oral communication and personal interaction within a group context—something critical to student development and not particularly compatible with on-line courses. This is not an insurmountable obstacle to having a hybrid FYS course (an instructor could require a certain number of in-class group assignments, for instance)—but it requires forethought and planning. Online CORE classes must receive CORE committee approval in the same way that on-campus courses do.

d. Both faculty and administration have voiced recognition that departments and faculty cannot be coerced into developing online courses, and that such a plan would provide poor instruction at best—which is not in anyone’s interest. Therefore, the committee suggests that the Committee on Online Instruction develop a plan of POSITIVE incentives to promote instructional development within departments. Directly sharing a portion of the revenues generated by an online course with the department that produces it seems a good plan with the important caveat that the largest portion of online course-revenue should benefit the UCA community as a whole. No single course, program, or instruction-delivery system operates in a vacuum and students are attracted to UCA because of its reputation—a reputation developed by all faculty, staff, and administrators.

e. IT services needs large-scale investment in order to provide prompt, 24-hour service to students and faculty from trained technicians. This investment should be tracked and weighed against the benefit produced—which includes benefits to both on-campus and online courses. The cost of IT services should not be pushed upon departments or programs. An IT fee could be added to all student fees to help cover this cost.

f. Faculty course development is one of the more difficult and time-consuming aspects of on-line instruction—more so than teaching the course for a semester. Development of new courses should be supported appropriately with pay. Bluntly—if faculty are not paid substantially for developing on-line courses, it will not happen. Students enrolling in an online course could pay a nominal online fee to help offset this cost.

g. The comprehensive technology plan should include budgetary amounts for hardware and software upgrades as well as up-to-date computers. Students should be warned of minimum system requirements before enrolling in courses. Again—preferably on the same page where they register for the course and see their required contact hours. These requirements should be adhered to firmly.

NB: Many of these suggestions echo recommendations from the (attached) Instructional Technologies Group’s Distance Learning Review report. The Academic Affairs Committee approves of this report and has used its findings for their own investigation—however, in our opinion many of the specific recommendations of that report cannot be fully weighed until the Chief IT Officer has taken up his position and there is a comprehensive IT plan.