

**Review of Distance Learning Support Structures and Policies  
at University of Central Arkansas**

Instructional Technology Group (ITG)

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**PART 1: PURPOSE**

The Instructional Technology Group (ITG) was organized in December 2011 by Dr. Jonathan Glenn, Associate Provost and CIO. ITG was charged in part with addressing Action Step 2A of UCA's strategic plan in response to the Higher Learning Commission's visit in 2010. This report includes observations from ITG's efforts to *review adequacy of online instructional support and policies* and also outlines recommendations for further addressing *online instructional needs* and establishing *consistent online class policies*.

**PART 2: METHODOLOGY**

In September 2012 all department chairs were asked to submit a list of fully online courses and degree programs. This list was compiled by ITG and compared with an official list of courses that are coded as being delivered online. The purpose of this step was to establish a target group for future information gathering efforts and verify that the list of courses coded in Banner as being delivered online is complete and accurate. At present, 22 academic departments offer one or more fully online course on a regular or semi-regular basis.

A survey instrument was then developed and targeted at the chairs of the 22 departments with online courses and/or programs. The primary purpose of the survey was to learn about the policies and support structures that are in place within each department for supporting faculty and students. An additional goal was to gain insight into the dispositions of chairs toward these aspects of distance learning. The survey was executed in March 2013 using the SmartEval system, and 14 chairs submitted responses. This represents a 63.63% response rate among departments with an online presence.

Immediately following the chair survey, a student survey was also developed and deployed using the SmartEval system to 1,764 students identified using Banner as being enrolled in one or more online course during the Spring 2013 semester. Responses were received from 215 students, or 12.18% of the survey group.

ITG also developed a faculty interview protocol and intended to talk to a cross-section of faculty from the 22 departments representing the target group. After reviewing the responses from the chairs, it was decided that any additional insight gained from speaking with faculty would be limited. Time constraints also influenced the decision to bypass this step.

Responses were reviewed and organized into key ideas or categories. This report was synthesized based upon the conclusions drawn from survey data and observations made by the diverse membership of ITG, who represent faculty from multiple departments and colleges, administration, and staff from Information Technology (IT) and the Instructional Development Center (IDC).

### **PART 3: CONCLUSIONS**

- Policies and support structures are needed from course to course and from program to program, as well as a centralized or coordinated means for setting standards. There is a need for increased awareness and attention among department-level leadership in this area. Students who participate in multiple online courses currently need to have a cohesive experience, both within a single academic program and across multiple programs.
- There is a need for increased understanding of why pedagogical training is essential for faculty who teach online. All online courses need to implement effective instructional methods. Despite ongoing efforts to accommodate faculty preferences regarding schedule, format, and content, additional action need to be taken to increase participation in relevant faculty development opportunities offered by the IDC.
- It is clear that the administration wants to promote and expand distance education. Accordingly, additional resources need to be allocated for equipment, training, and teaching and support personnel. Furthermore, a concerted effort needs to be given in order to ensure the *quality* of online courses.
- Students who responded to the survey indicated an overall satisfaction with instructor responsiveness but felt that technical support should be expanded. This was also true within a subgroup of respondents who have taken online courses at both UCA and other institutions.
- Students desire more intentional interaction among participants and increased use of instructional multimedia.

### **PART 4: PROPOSED ACTIONS**

#### Support:

- Establish a 24/7 support center for both faculty and students with personnel who are specialized in facilitating the online learning experience and skilled in the use of all technology platforms. Departments should not have to support their own students internally. This expanded help desk should also provide instructional support for faculty, as the existing IDC structure does not have the capacity to provide much-needed 24/7 support.

- Develop a website to serve as a clearinghouse of information related to online course design, advising for online students, training materials for students and faculty, and other resources.

#### Policies:

- Establish an Online Learning Standards Committee, which will develop broad institutional standards and a self-evaluation rubric whereby each academic program will create and implement its own set of policies, support structures, and instructional standards. Programs will perform an annual self-evaluation and report the results to the Online Learning Standards Committee as a matter of information.
- Reallocate the existing Online Tuition/Fee structure in order to dedicate funding for each online course to pay for technology equipment and support, and faculty training and mentoring.

#### Instruction:

- Require faculty who teach online to participate in both technological and pedagogical training/orientation prior to their first online course and to recertify/recalibrate approximately every two years in order to stay abreast of advancements in technology and best practices for the online environment.
- When hiring new faculty who will be teaching online, ensure that successful candidates have adequate skills or training in online teaching.
- Provide faculty with expanded support (which might include, among other things, release time) for developing online courses, acknowledging that online course development often requires new skill acquisition and is more time intensive compared to the development of an on-ground course.

#### Technology:

- Establish minimum technology requirements for students who take online courses. Advertise these prominently during the enrollment process so that students are expressly aware of expectations.
- Provide faculty who teach online with notebook computers, iPads, web cams, headset microphones, and other technology that is deemed necessary for the courses they have been assigned to teach.
- Offer robust online training for students for the learning management system and other platforms that are typically used by faculty and students in an online class.