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Background

In the 21st century there is a democratization of information arising from the explosion of accessibility that is freely available to everyone. From anywhere at any time, students tap into the innovations of our time, interact with the great minds of our time, and participate in conversations that help them observe and even create new information as it happens.

We know now that one of the most effective means of preparing students to become global citizens who can function and succeed across cultures and environments in an increasingly interdependent world is through Internet-based distributed learning.

Lessons Learned

A goal imbedded in UNCP's 2006-2011 strategic plan was to improve access to higher education through distance program delivery. The idea was to capitalize on the combined experience and knowledge of faculty, staff, and consultants to meet technology-based instructional needs as we engage students. However, the intervening recession and budget reductions slowed the process. Today, allocation of additional funds for distance education technology and programs is critical.

Big Picture

Most people see the Internet as an effective and efficient communication and research tool. Our own university faculty members are using it to leverage the learning possibilities beyond the physical walls of UNCP. They harness online resources in course management systems to induce students to love the act of learning as they find their own new knowledge and understanding. Students are introduced to the necessity of diversity, a strong work ethic, rigor of content, and the tools needed to find authentic gems on the Internet.

Various studies suggest most high school graduates in 2020 will have received most of at least their senior high school instruction via online course delivery, according to reports from the National Center for Education Statistics at the U.S. Department of Education. Already in 2012, there are many online or virtual high schools across the United States, including the North Carolina Virtual Public School. In fact, 90 percent of states have online learning programs, according to *Edutopia*. At risk students are taking online classes to catch up and stay in school. AP students who are unable to take classes in their local school are able to seek online alternatives. Students who want to graduate in an alternative time frame take extra classes online. When those high school graduates arrive at the university, they will expect to enter a learning environment for which they have the necessary skills and experience.

Meanwhile, about two-thirds of all new jobs nationwide are expected to require a college degree by 2020, according to the national nonprofit organization Complete College America.

Non-traditional students of age 25 and older make up about half of all college and university enrollments in the United States today. These adult students need undergraduate and graduate education to enter, change, and advance in their careers. For many, work and family schedules make attending a traditional class at a university not a good option. Internet classes and degree programs that transcend the time and space requirements appeal to a motivated independent learner. UNCP already is delivering courses and degree programs to students at a distance without their having to leave home or interrupt their careers. Much more development is needed.

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A U.S. Department of Education 2009 report found key benefits of online education to students include increased flexibility of time and location; a new relevance to learning about contemporary society and professional and industry practices; easier sharing of information and creation of online communities of practice based on interest rather than geographic location; greater access to a depth and breadth of resources and information; enhanced diversity and enriching learning experiences and opportunities for cross-disciplinary, cross-cultural and cross-campus collaborations at local, national and international levels; greater access to equal opportunities for disabled students; and facilitation of the digital information literacy skills that are required now in society and the workplace. Add to that the benefit to schools from the streamlining of the administrative aspects of teaching.

Of course, there are some considerations such as the access to technology and the Internet being problematic; the need for software training; a feeling of isolation among some students or teachers; and a sometimes overwhelming and confusing overload of information, how-to guides, help and resources provided online.

The North Carolina Virtual Public School courses use Blackboard course management software to maximize student interaction in class. Instructors also use video, interactive whiteboards, wikis, active virtual worlds, and online discussion tools to engage learners.

Online courses that use virtual reality allow students to take part in more authentic learning. For example, Brigham Young University's ChemLab allows students to complete chemical experiments in an environment where mistakes can be made with no consequence. Students can repeat experiments as many times as needed for expensive chemicals.

UNCP is challenged to provide multiple distance learning resources for students. In addition to course management systems, there are lecture capture, podcasts, supplemental materials, rich learning activities, virtual worlds, and other technologies for content. Students today expect their learning activities will engage digital media content along with technologies such as social media, entertainment, and gaming. Students also expect course activities that engage them as learners in an active learning environment with access to media-rich content. A challenge for faculty and support staff is in continued training and support resources for developing and delivering learning activities to match expectations.

The U.S. Department of Education reports that K-12 and post-secondary students benefit from online learning compared with traditional face-to-face methods of instruction. However, as college costs increase, less personal dollars are available for buying technology. The digital divide, therefore, remains an issue in southeastern North Carolina.

Strategic Themes

Chancellor Carter envisions four overarching themes for UNCP – the new normal operational environment, student success, institution of choice, and regional engagement.

Theme number one: *Address the new normal.* We must overhaul our policies and processes to become more efficient, effective, open and transparent, and clarify responsibility and authority.

The university should be able to carry additional state dollars forward year-to-year in order to amass funds for large purchases such as online technology infrastructure items. The student technology fee should not be designated as state funding.

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UNCP should expand cloud technologies for student mobility and virtualize the classroom experience to enhance learning at a distance. The use of 3D virtual reality as well as the Virtual Computer Lab should be expanded, locating specialized software and activities in the cloud for faculty, staff, and students.

Theme number two: *Focus on student success.* UNCP is in the process of raising admission standards over five years. For distance education, this means adding and creating resources for student instruction online.

Data gathered indicate students, while not dissatisfied with the current technology the university places in their hands, want increased access to technology. As a result of that growth, distance education software and functionality must be expanded to support student projects and learning.

Strategies for technology include further developing and implementing student academic technology software and systems to facilitate advisor/student interaction and enhanced earlier alerts for students experiencing academic difficulties, enabling development of individualized online support programs.

Given the prediction that most students will be entering from online high schools in a few years, UNCP must begin to establish a student technology requirement and provide remedial intervention for students in the use of online course delivery technology. Free basic technology courses should be offered to students not meeting online-course entrance standards. Teaching and learning technology needs to be enhanced and new learning systems implemented to support multiple instructional modalities for both hybrid and fully online courses.

Theme number three: *UNCP to become an institution of choice, beyond affordability and access.* To support this effort UNCP must develop means to retain robust personal interaction with students in an online environment. Enhancing mobile technologies by creating mobile interfaces for Banner and the Blackboard course management system are ways for technology to support this objective.

Enhanced communication systems to facilitate new and different forms of student text messaging would be another way to accomplish this goal. Because student support systems heavily communicate through the campus network, UNCP must plan and fund a totally wireless network with greater speed and capacity for the campus.

Theme number four: *Focus on regional engagement.* There are strategies for UNCP to engage with the town of Pembroke, Robeson County and sister campuses.

The UNC Teaching and Learning with Technology (TLT) Collaborative has set a high water mark over a dozen years for its collaborative efforts and established a world-class model for sharing information and resources online to promote faculty and staff development and student learning with technology. UNCP has been at the core of the effort in recent years. UNC General Administration (GA) should return to supporting the TLTC with funding. UNCP should retain its leadership position at the center of that collaborative.

Chancellor Carter challenged the campus to maintain its core principles regardless of how large or complex UNCP becomes – for example, providing educational pathways to a better life regardless of one's station in life. The opportunity exists to explore technology partnerships with the various campus departments and disciplines to enhance student technology engagement online, thus increasing student technological literacy skills. The university should create service learning experiences and paid internships in using online campus technologies. For example, students in the Department of Mass Communication or in the School of

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Business could play an important role in the success of the proposed downtown center. Given online virtual reality technologies, the possibilities are limited only by the imagination.

Options

Teaching in the digital environment requires a shift to a new model in which the instructor acts as the guide or multi-resource person to students actively engaged in independent learning. The content subject matter is learned using a mixture of media, multiple resources, problem solving and critical thinking methods. Student success is measured when students solve problems, communicate ideas, present information, and learn how to learn in the new environment. The instructor is one source of knowledge alongside the many rich sources of information for learning now readily accessible electronically or from the traditional print sources.

The issue for Academic Affairs at UNCP and the faculty is no longer one of how to use technology to teach, but one where instructors acknowledge the way the world is already developing, and understand the significance of online literacy and the role that collaboration and online engagement plays in student learning and their future workplace environment.

Projected Costs

Delivery of academic program content by any means is expensive and increased funding for distance education delivery needs to be developed immediately, including a technology funding allocation in support of distance education.

Short and Long-Term Plans

UNCP Academic Affairs Office should move forward with creating a focal point for innovation in online instructional technology. Grants, stipends and travels funds could be directed to faculty to create imaginative new opportunities online for course and program delivery innovation and the sharing of successful practices with a variety of online teaching technologies.

Faculty mentorships could be created providing stipends and release time for faculty experts in online program delivery construction and course development as well as promoting increased student learning online through the use of Internet technologies such as digital media, research analysis, data visualization, gaming and geographic information systems. Creative and successful use of Internet technologies for increased student learning should become a positive factor in faculty evaluations.

All efforts should be focused on excellence in service and efficiency and effectiveness in academic program delivery online to ensure that our foundation grows stronger and is in place to meet the even more technologically savvy students who will be arriving at the university well before 2020.

This innovation will make UNCP a true institution of choice among students.