

**Ad-Hoc Committee on Online Education
Interim Report – SWOT Analysis of Online Education at UALR
December 2013**

Following are the mission statement for online education at UALR and the SWOT analysis conducted. The mission statement has been modified since it was first presented to the Senate in early September. The SWOT analysis is in its preliminary stages. It is based on concerns shared with the committee by staff, faculty and students. However there has been no methodical analysis or verification of those concerns. The next stage of the SWOT, to start in the spring semester, will be to compare the SWOT analysis with existing resources and policies as well as to collect data from stakeholders. This stage will result in a final SWOT analysis and which will then serve as the basis for the strategic plan.

Mission Statement

UALR's faculty and staff are committed to creating and providing quality, cutting-edge, online education. They will empower students through online educational experiences that prepare them to be productive citizens and to pursue life long learning.

SWOT Analysis of Online Education at UALR

1. STRENGTHS.

The Online Format. The nature of the online format provides access to opportunities in higher education for more students than the existing physical campus infrastructure can support. This format allows for some long-term reductions in overhead costs through savings in the use and maintenance of physical facilities. Similarly, the online format can provide accommodations for prospective students in rural areas of the state, allowing the university to recruit students in those areas.

UALR's Environment. The university benefits from the name recognition that comes from being located in Arkansas's capitol city and its largest metropolitan area, Little Rock. Additionally, UALR benefits from the support it has thus far received from stakeholders at all levels. UALR's administration has a long history of strong support for online education, and has been at the forefront of the UA System's efforts toward online programs thus far. This puts UALR in a strategically advantageous position as the UA System becomes more purposeful in encouraging and promoting online courses and programs.

Existing Resources. A large contingent of UALR's faculty either already teaches courses in an online format or has expressed interest in doing so, and there has been a steady increase in the number of online sections offered in recent years. These faculty members have access to training and support resources through the STaR office and IT Services, which have been allocated funding to develop and provide these support mechanisms. Quality control for instructional design can be enhanced through Quality Matters certification. Additionally, the recent expansion of the testing center allows for the increased integrity of online testing and assessment. Further, the recent restructuring within the university has placed online education under the purview of Academic Affairs, which is expected to enhance future coordination of online educational programs across the university.

2. WEAKNESSES.

Vision and Planning. At present, UALR lacks a master plan for the future of online education and how it will fit in the university's overall strategic and development plans. Its approach thus far has been reactive rather than proactive, and has involved the adoption (and subsequent shedding) of some models without sufficient consideration of their potential effects or input from faculty. In integrating online education with future plans, the university must determine what the most appropriate blend of delivery systems will be, whether that be in face-to-face classroom settings, through fully online settings, or a blend of the two. A number of areas have yet to be addressed in these plans:

Development and Alumni Relations. An emphasis on online education is potentially problematic for fundraising and placing students. Online students are not particularly loyal to the university after they graduate, as they do not experience the same socialization into the institutional culture as students who learn in a face-to-face environment.

Market Issues. There currently is no clear definition of what UALR's potential market share in online education could be, nor what segments or regions of that market it intends to pursue. Additionally, the university lacks a clear plan for an approach to online education that focuses on the primarily non-traditional, often underprepared student population that UALR serves. The working assumption that online education will increase graduation rates is questionable and not necessarily supported by available data.

Course Assessments. At present, no plan exists to assess programs and teaching effectiveness in a reasonable and fair manner as it applies to faculty members, private coaches, and graduate teaching assistants. The university also lacks a mechanism to assess the implementation and management of multiple course sections, which is crucial in that the implementation is significantly different from that of face-to-face courses. Particular attention should be paid to the outcomes and feasibility of accelerated online coursework.

Funding and Resources. While the university has already allocated some financial resources to enhancing online programs, those resources are very limited and are further challenged by the recent 10% across-the-board budget cuts. Faculty members often do not have sufficient computer equipment or other hardware and software required to teach online in an effective manner, and there is no articulation of funding specifically for continuing education in online teaching. Additionally, many of the latest programs and features for Blackboard are not available, and faculty are neither involved in nor made privy to the decision-making process when such new features are adopted.

Training and Support Mechanisms. There are a number of concerns with respect to the availability and efficacy of the resources currently available for faculty and students.

Faculty Training and Development. While opportunities for faculty training and development do exist, STaR faces a challenge in adequately communicating training and development resources for faculty. To date, demand for these services has not been sufficient to justify an expansion of training offerings. There is an absence of incentives for professional development, whether financial or through recognition at the departmental level for the purposes of tenure and promotion. There is also a lack of clarity as to who subsidizes continuing education for faculty who teach online. Traditionally, departments support content expertise opportunities, but technological and pedagogical training require their own additional funds.

Student Preparation and Support. Many students come to UALR unprepared for the demands of their coursework. Students often do not understand the nature and demands of online courses, and in many cases they do not possess adequate technical skills nor have off-campus access to computer resources, and many are unaware of campus resources. This lack of student knowledge creates

significant challenges to retention, student success, and the faculty's ability to deliver course material effectively.

Technical Support. The lack of a single, centralized source of support, combined with the lack of support availability on evenings and weekends, poses a significant road block to the effective delivery of online education.

Institutional Policy and Organizational Issues. UALR's infrastructure for online education is generally not well organized. Redundancy and confusion exist within the university, and there is currently no source with clear-cut information on which department or individual bears responsibility for each component of online education.

Institutional Data Collection and Analysis. The university suffers from a lack of data points to consider and inform its decision-making regarding online education. There is currently no central data collection on attendance and enrollment in traditional versus online courses. Some data are not collected in a systematic fashion, and what data are collected are difficult to gather, organize, and analyze. Further, there seems to be inadequate communications between IT and Institutional Research, meaning that data are not shared effectively. It is important that demographics, re-enrollment, and graduation rates for all students are maintained, and that data are stored in such a way that they can be readily analyzed for evaluation purposes.

Registration and Aid Issues. Students and faculty alike face too many hurdles with regard to registration, financial aid, and academic advising. For example, if a student forgets to confirm registration, faculty may be told by administration to re-enroll those students, which can create overloads. Additionally, late registration is even more challenging than regular registration, and students in accelerated programs face difficulty every time they register for the second term. Further, there are an excessive number of steps in BOSS and/or Banner for faculty members to effectively assist students in the academic advising process.

Leadership Concerns. Online education initiatives thus far have been primarily led and conceived by administrators rather than faculty, resulting in a top-down approach and a disconnection between policy and practice. There seems to be a lack of understanding about the pedagogical issues related to online learning and what quality online education entails.

Lack of Policies Regarding Teaching Load. There is presently no established policy regarding teaching load for online courses. Load is a major issue, addressed widely in pedagogical literature. There is no consensus other than recognizing that effective online teaching takes more time than equivalent classroom teaching. However, current policies regarding faculty teaching loads do not account for any release time to develop, maintain, and update online courses. The lack of policy regarding load and scheduling of online courses leads to unevenness in load within and across colleges and sometimes even within departments. Caps on the number of seats available per course are decided arbitrarily, rather than by best practices as outlined in the issue. Additionally, there is no uniform policy for the use of coaches, graduate teaching assistants, or the implementation of multiple course sections.

Tenure and Promotion Policies. There is no standard for departmental, college, and university governance and tenure and promotion documents and policies regarding the teaching and development of online courses and the management of online degree programs as compared to their traditional counterparts.

Learning Management Systems (LMS) and Design Policies. At present, there is no clear policy regarding the appearance or design of online courses, nor is there any policy relating to support for faculty innovation and use of alternative Learning Management Systems.

Intellectual Property Policy. The university's current Technology Enhanced Course Materials (TECM) policy assumes that the intellectual property rights for any TECM reside with the faculty member

unless an agreement has been signed indicating otherwise. However, recent case law appears to challenge the enforceability of this policy, which is of concern to faculty.

Student Behavior and Academic Integrity. There is confusion as to policy, procedure, and the adjudication of student behavioral or academic integrity issues in the online environment.

Faculty-Administration Relations. There is a lack of clarity regarding the scope of faculty support for online initiatives. Administrative decisions regarding online education over recent years have changed frequently, creating a sense of skepticism and mistrust among the faculty. There is concern among the faculty that UALR may attempt to emulate for-profit models of education, using Ph.D.'s and others with terminal degrees to develop courses and related material, but delivering those courses to students through adjunct or contingent faculty at low wage levels with no benefits or office space. In addition, some faculty members, chairs, and administrators do not acknowledge the value of online education or understand the work and effort involved in teaching an online course. In some cases, online faculty members are marginalized simply because they teach online.

3. OPPORTUNITIES.

Structural and Resource Integration. The expansion of online education programs at UALR presents faculty and administrators the opportunity to integrate vital academic supports from the very beginning. The current restructuring of academic and administrative affairs may allow the university to determine how to best allocate its limited resources in order to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of educational delivery, both in traditional and online settings. Additionally, there is an opportunity to begin long-term research on which types of educational practices produce students who are best prepared for graduation, possessing critical thinking skills and content knowledge.

Recruitment. Providing a diverse offering of online courses and programs presents UALR with the opportunity to recruit a wider range of students with the type of academic credentials needed for success from a broader geographical area.

Innovation. Online initiatives provide faculty with the opportunity to develop and promote interdisciplinary courses and programs, as well as more specialized, short-term courses that serve the needs of business and industry. Additionally, ever-emerging technologies enable faculty to develop new skills and pedagogies and identify the most effective and efficient online delivery models.

4. THREATS.

Market Challenges. The online education market is changing rapidly, and there is concern that the market may be nearing its saturation point. Additionally, there are questions as to whether UALR will be able to compete on a national or even local basis. There are significant challenges to be faced in competing against other institutions within the state of Arkansas. A threat also lies within the marketplace in that high-quality online programs can be difficult to differentiate from low-quality programs offered by other institutions. Additionally, programs which offer 50% or more of their courses online must obtain approval through the UA System and at the state level and are subject to challenges from other system campuses, including UA-Fayetteville, which could potentially hamper future expansion of UALR's online offerings.

Funding Challenges. The recent shift by the state legislature to a performance-based model of higher education funding creates uncertainty as to the availability of funding for online initiatives. This leaves the university more reliant on tuition and other sources of revenue, creating tension between the need to recruit and retain students and the desire to provide a quality educational experience.

Risks to Accreditation. Should class sizes, especially online, increase without a proportional increase in faculty and instructor lines, the university may become at risk for losing its regional accreditation.