Report on Ad Hoc Task Force on Policies in eLearning
For Senate April 29, 2022

Task Force Members

Joanne Liebman Matson, Rhetoric and Writing [VP Faculty Senate]
May Atkins, Social Work
Bruce Bauer, Information Science
Chelsea Bradley, Reading Education
Roger Dorsey, Accounting
Zac Hagins, World Languages - French
Melissa Hardeman, Mathematics
Heidi Skurat Harris, Rhetoric and Writing
Mary Parker, Criminal Justice
Lundon Pinneo, Middle Childhood Education
Peggy Scranton, Political Science
Scott Woolbright, Biology
Yue Zhao, Management

Introduction

This ad hoc committee was created to review policies posted on [eLearning's webpage](#) on subjects within the Senate's legislative authority. The University Constitution, Article III, states that "[t]he Faculty Senate shall have the right to make recommendations on all matters that concern the educational mission and effectiveness of the University . . . [that] include but are not limited to the following:

1. Admission requirements
2. Curriculum and courses
3. Degrees and requirements for degrees
4. Calendar and schedules . . . "

It should be noted that while the Task Force operated, language on the eLearning website kept changing. Policies that began the semester called "policies" were changed mid-stream to "business processes" and then later to "processes" and "models." However, changing the policies' names did not bring them out of the faculty purview: whatever they were called, they still concern *curriculum and courses* and *calendar and schedules*.

Additionally, it should be noted that these policies are not included in the policies archive of the University, and their development has occurred outside the shared governance process of the university.

The Task Force reviewed these areas:

1. Grievance procedure
2. Course evaluation by students
3. Evaluation of online courses
4. Course modality of UALR Online

Grievance procedure

Prior to the formation of the task force, the grievance procedure listed on the eLearning website was distinct from the procedure for the campus as a whole. By the end of 2021, however, the website had changed so the procedure in eLearning linked to the university-wide procedure managed by the Dean of Students Office.

Course evaluation by students

The eLearning website outlines a [course evaluation process](#) that was updated Fall 2021. Since course evaluations are covered under Senate Policy 403.18, the Faculty Senate charged its Faculty Professional Development Committee with reviewing ongoing practices and bringing forth relevant legislation. Presumably, the eLearning website will change to reflect the policies as they're adopted.

Evaluation of online courses

Sometime during Fall 2021, a new policy appeared on the eLearning website, stating that all UALR Online courses would be evaluated using the STaR Online Course Design Quality Assurance Standards, and that programs whose courses failed to meet Silver standards would be eliminated from the Online Program. That policy is now a link on the eLearning page to [RSI and QA Course Review](#). That page lists all Online Campus programs, and there is a spreadsheet with each course in the program and its status in the review process. Most programs are listed to be reviewed in Fall 2022 or 2023. Two programs (the Mass Media BAs) are listed as having a complete review, but there is no indication of whether the standards were met.

The Instructional Design and Quality Assurance page does not have this review process as a link; rather it links to a different page called [Online Course Design Quality Assurance Standards](#) that describes an *elective,* not *mandatory* review using STaR standards.

The Task Force recognizes there are both administrative and faculty interests involved in assuring that all online courses meet "regular and substantive interaction" standards as established by the Federal government. But to say there are administrative interests is not to eliminate the faculty interests. In this case, the adoption occurred without discussion or even notification to the faculty in online programs.

Course modality of UALR Online

The most contentious subject reviewed by the Task Force is the online campus policy on synchronous and asynchronous courses. This is an area that crosses faculty and administrator responsibilities, and the Task Force recognizes there are administrative interests, particularly in pricing. However, the Task Force also recognizes that the teaching of courses within a program, along with the scheduling of courses within the resource constraints of a given unit, still fall within the purview of faculty authority to make recommendations.

When UALR Online first started in 2015, the options for teaching modality were limited to online and on-campus, and online meant asynchronous courses taught through Blackboard. Programs submitting proposals for the Online Campus promised to make a path to graduation available to students in the online program just as one is available to those in the on-campus program. Many programs set up schedules with alternating online and on-campus courses. Since then, sections for Online Campus students (9Ux sections) have frequently been "stacked" with online sections for Main Campus students (99x sections). The eLearning office could not provide

data on how many 9Ux sections are typically stacked with 99x sections, but [data]about the number of Main Campus students enrolled in online courses even prior to the pandemic suggest a large majority of 9Ux sections have also been taught as 99x sections simultaneously.

The asynchronous approach was a function of the technology available at the time and not necessary to the design of UALR Online. The fees eliminated in the [UALR Online flat-fee rate] are fees such as facilities, public safety, athletics, and health services, all related to on-campus presence. In other words, the UALR model was built on an opposition between on-campus and remote delivery, not between synchronous and asynchronous delivery.

Then the pandemic came. Everything went online. Because of technology, it became possible to teach an on-campus course while streaming it to remote students. Where "online'' originally meant asynchronous, it now can mean either synchronous or asynchronous. A new section type (9Sx) was introduced at UA Little Rock for synchronous online courses available to Main Campus students. Such innovation in teaching pedagogy is just one of the "opportunities" forged in the crisis of COVID 19.

At some point in the evolution of the Online Campus, a policy (later called business process and now called model) was added to the eLearning website that stated that Online Campus courses were by default asynchronous. It is unclear when this policy was proposed, nor by what body. It was not discussed within academic curriculum bodies, nor was it discussed with programs already approved to offer Online Campus degrees.

As we emerged from the pandemic, and even as the Task Force engaged in its discussions, the enforcement of this policy became increasingly rigid so that whereas in the past, programs were easily able to periodically schedule synchronous 9Ux sections stacked with on-campus and 9Sx sections, by Fall 2021, programs were no longer permitted to do so. Indeed their attempts were met with open hostility by academic administrators.

Thus we have a paradox: as innovations emerge for online delivery, UALR Online is becoming more restrictive. The Task Force reviewed offerings available at other institutions and [found many institutions offer Online-only programs at least in part synchronously]. The Task Force also surveyed online students and found that while there are some who could never attend synchronously, there are others who can, and who thrive in the synchronous environment, saying they feel part of a community for the first time. The Task Force wondered if there was not a way to make synchronous online courses available to Online Campus students should those courses fit into their schedules. At the same time, Online Campus programs would continue to be required to offer an asynchronous path to graduation. The Task Force discussed a policy for Online Campus course modality that reflected these principles. Attached is the latest [draft] of this policy, which was supported by the majority of Task Force members.

It became clear during Task Force discussions that the UA Little Rock administration is concerned that the reduced flat-fee pricing offered to Online Campus students may be unsustainable. Members of the Task Force suspect that concern about the economic impact of this pricing is what drives the recent rigidity on course modality. However, while the Task Force recognizes the legitimacy of this concern, it does not understand how course modality affects the economics of the reduced flat-fee pricing model since the marginal cost of offering a synchronous 9Ux section when there is already a 9Sx section is minuscule. In contrast, offering separate asynchronous and synchronous online sections of the same course is costly, and most programs lack the resources to do that. Thus far, eLearning has failed to provide data that would explain the need for the policy excluding the synchronous course modality.

*　*　*

Recommendations

Of the four policies on the eLearning website reviewed by the Task Force, one, the Grievance Policy, is now consistent with university-wide policy. With respect to the policy on student evaluation of courses, the Senate is reviewing ongoing practices and proposing legislation; and it is expected the eLearning website will be changed to reflect that legislation when adopted.

Of the other two policies, on evaluating online courses and on prescribing course modality, the Task Force believes eLearning should be required to engage in the existing faculty governance process.

The Task Force therefore proposes

. . . that the the Chancellor appoint a cross functional committee to include faculty as well as administrators from Academic Affairs and Finance to review UALR Online to do the following:

1. Develop a plan to bring decisions about courses, curriculum, schedules, calendars, and any other matters faculty have authority to make recommendations on into the existing faculty shared governance process;

2. Review enrollment, revenue, and costs of the Online Campus to determine its feasibility and parameters going forward; and

3. Develop a strategic plan for online education in general at UA Little Rock going forward.