Online Education and the College of Charleston
A Report to the Faculty from the Committee on Academic Planning
April 2011

The College’s Strategic Plan mentions online education three times in its lists of actions that would enable the College to “enhance the academic core,” to “develop world-class graduate programs,” and to “create enhanced non-state resources.” As recently as 2007, an earlier Academic Planning Committee brought the Senate a resolution opposing all online instruction at the College. That resolution did not pass, but many faculty remain suspicious of online education.

Compared with other institutions, the College’s offerings in online education (also known as distance education) have been very small, but they are growing. The Summer School plans to offer 18 online courses in Summer 2011, over twice as many as it did in 2009 when the first 7 online courses were offered. Should we be concerned about this? Do online courses run counter to the academic mission of a student-centered, high-quality liberal arts and sciences college? After meeting with College administrators and studying internal College documents as well as published articles, we have reached the following conclusions.

1) Online course learning outcomes can be as good as or better than outcomes in a traditional face-to-face course. This method of delivery is not inherently flawed. Like other modes of instruction, it can be done well or poorly.

2) If an online course is of high quality, it will be very time-consuming to develop. Instructors cannot expect to use the same syllabus, lectures (now videotaped), and assignments they found successful in a face-to-face course. Instead, an instructor must consider the learning outcomes for the course, then rebuild it from the inside out, using the best online delivery methods available (Fish & Wickersham).

3) If an online course is of high quality, it will be at least as time-consuming to teach as a face-to-face course. Regular interaction between instructor and student (via written feedback, discussion boards, and other media) is even more important in an online course than in a face-to-face setting. Thus, even after a good course has been designed, the instructor must spend significant time monitoring the students’ participation and giving them individualized feedback (Finch & Sautter).

4) A high-quality online course does not enable an institution to enroll an unlimited number of students. Online instruction at the College is unlikely to be a “magic bullet” that increases tuition revenue while requiring minimal investment in salaries and infrastructure, nor will it keep tuition from rising. (Many institutions actually charge higher tuition for online courses, as noted in the October 2010 Chronicle.)

5) A high-quality online course is clearly consistent with the College’s academic mission. The following conditions, overseen by the Summer School, make it likely that the courses we now offer are of high quality:

   a) SUPPORT: Faculty who wish to offer summer courses must apply to do so, normally in the preceding Fall semester. They complete a needs assessment survey and are assigned an instructional technologist with expertise in the technology and equipment available for delivering online instruction. This enables the faculty member to design the course appropriately for an online format.
b) SMALL SIZE: These courses have small enrollments. To encourage more faculty to develop online courses, the Summer School allows online courses to run with smaller numbers than are required for a normal summer course; the College still makes money, but less than it would make if the same number of students were enrolled in a face-to-face class (Gamboa).

c) EDUCATION: The Summer School has worked to educate College faculty about online instruction. Speakers who developed other schools’ online curricula, as well as C of C faculty who attended an institute devoted to online pedagogy, have held open workshops, some of which may now be viewed online (Finch & Sautter).

6) Other conditions, however, could decrease the quality of online courses and hence undermine the College’s academic mission:

a) LIMITED SUPPORT: The Summer School notes that the College’s Instructional Technologists are nearly “at capacity” for the number of faculty they can assist with online course development. If we significantly increase the number of online course offerings, we risk offering courses that have been inadequately redesigned for an online environment. Instructors will face decreased availability of Instructional Technologists to help them troubleshoot issues that arise while the course is running. Similarly, continued online instruction will require that our current infrastructure is at least maintained, if not improved. If budget cuts were to reduce the quality of our infrastructure, this would dramatically affect online course instruction, unlike much face-to-face instruction that can often be carried out with minimal technology.

b) ACADEMIC INTEGRITY, a.k.a. CHEATING: The integrity of students’ work in online courses remains a legitimate cause for concern, although there are many ways to authenticate the identity of online students and to decrease the likelihood of students submitting plagiarized material (McNabb, Prince, Yates). Some institutions authenticate identity visually through video chat or other kinds of surveillance software that operates in student’s computers. It’s also common to require students to take proctored exams at a testing site. Other issues (detecting plagiarized papers, for example) remain, but these are essentially the same issues that can arise in a face-to-face course.

c) INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY: Faculty who develop and teach online courses invest significant effort in the process. According to the AAUP, the intellectual property of these course materials should rest with the faculty member (Nemire). The College’s policy on intellectual property of online courses is still being reviewed by Legal Affairs; C of C faculty developing coursework now may not retain full rights to their material in the future.

7) Online courses elsewhere have had higher rates of failure and non-completion than traditional courses. Although C of C students may be seeking out online courses for their convenience (Gamboa), many students have performed poorly in this mode of course delivery, for a variety of reasons (Bernard et al, Brady, Rovai & Wighting). Students who succeed in online courses must be highly self-motivated; even within that group of students, online courses do not suit every learning style (discussed in more detail by Finch & Sautter). Some disciplines and courses may also be a better fit for the medium than others.

8) Because of all these factors, the Academic Planning Committee would strenuously object to College policies that required students to enroll in online courses or that required

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faculty to teach them. Fortunately, as far as we can tell, no such policies exist at the College. (The Chronicle notes that these policies do exist at an increasing number of institutions.)

9) The Summer School is an appropriately limited framework for online instruction at the College of Charleston. Low enrollments help keep quality high; the small number of summer offerings means students receive most of their C of C instruction in face-to-face settings. Summer School revenues, in decline in recent years, may be enhanced by online courses; summer tuition dollars currently spent elsewhere may come to the College if students can take our courses without living in Charleston or attending class at fixed hours daily. These courses, like all our summer offerings, benefit students needing to make progress toward their degree and improve their GPAs, and they benefit faculty wishing to earn additional income.

10) Other potential benefits and dangers that faculty should be aware of:

a) BENEFITS: High-quality online courses can add value to traditional courses, since many of the components can be repurposed for supplemental instruction. Many C of C faculty already make use of some form of online instruction, enabling students to review earlier material, apply concepts, take practice tests, and discuss course readings. In short, online materials can be an excellent motivator for that elusive “time on task” that all teachers hope students will devote to their particular course.

b) DANGERS: On the other hand, poorly designed and poorly taught online courses, or a program of study that included more online courses than face-to-face courses, could damage our “brand” as a high-quality, student-centered liberal arts college. With state support dwindling as much as it has, the College naturally seeks new sources of revenue, and some may see online instruction as a potential cash cow. To counterbalance the institution’s natural interest in protecting its own financial welfare, faculty must maintain continued oversight of online instruction.

Conclusion: We recommend that the Speaker of the Faculty explicitly charge a standing committee with this ongoing oversight. The committee so charged should report regularly to the faculty on the state of online instruction at the college—its scope, the level of support being provided, and any other matters related to the quality of our online course offerings.

We also encourage all faculty to become more conversant with the pedagogy of online education. For this purpose, we have assembled a bibliography of sources that we found helpful, and have placed copies of these sources on e-reserve. These materials can be found under the course title “Academic Planning,” with Burton Callicott listed as the faculty member. The password is “planning.”

2010-2011 Faculty Committee on Academic Planning

Burton Callicott, Christian Coseru, Julia Eichelberger (Chair), Lynne Ford (Provost’s Representative), James McManus (SGA Representative), Nancy Nenno, Vijay Vulava
Sources on Distance Education

*The Chronicle of Higher Education.* October 31, 2010. (Entire issue devoted to online education, noting both benefits and drawbacks to online courses now being offered throughout the US.)

**C of C Materials**
College of Charleston Office of Summer Programs. “DE Course Petition,” “Needs Assessment,” “TLT Services.”

Gamboa, Sylvia, Dean of Summer Programs. “Report on Distance Education and the Summer School Online Pilot Project of 2009.” College of Charleston.


**Best Practices/"How To"**


**Cheating**


**Student Success/Failure**


**Intellectual Property**
MERLOT (Multimedia Education Resource for Learning and Online Teaching) http://www.merlot.org/Home.po