

# DRAFT Interim Report

## A Framework for Online Teaching and Learning at the University at Albany

### Introduction

In Fall 2012, a broad and diverse group of University at Albany faculty, staff members and students\* were enlisted to create and participate in a University-wide conversation about the current state and future possibilities for online teaching and learning. Four working groups were organized around the following objectives:

- Creating a shared vision for online teaching and learning
- Creating a "one stop" resource for faculty
- Supporting and engaging students
- Ensuring technology support

The groups' charge was to assess the current state of online teaching and learning at UAlbany, in terms of the Sloan Consortium Quality Scorecard, which can be found at [http://sloanconsortium.org/quality\\_scoreboard\\_online\\_program](http://sloanconsortium.org/quality_scoreboard_online_program) and to make recommendations for next steps for the University at Albany. Detailed assessments of the Sloan C Quality Scorecard have been assembled. The following document provides a preliminary set of observations and recommendations based on that review, as well as surveys of faculty and students.

\*Membership of the working group appears at the end of this document.

## **Objective 1: Creating a vision for online teaching and learning**

### **Rationale for Online Teaching and Learning**

The University at Albany, like all universities and colleges, faces new realities of the higher education landscape. These include

- Changing dynamics of recruitment and retention, as a result of changing demographics of learners and the diminishing pipeline of traditional students
- Changes in university teaching, *via* application of education research and emerging discoveries in the learning sciences
- Changing student values, behavior and modes of interaction, reflecting their extensive experiences with online modes in and beyond education
- Changing technology and access to it—ubiquitous devices and ubiquitous expectations
- Changing context of “information.” (Information is no longer confined to a narrowly available canon of texts controlled by a limited number of institutions and experts. Information is abundant, ubiquitous, and chaotic, requiring students to focus less on acquisition of information and more on how to sort, manage, evaluate and use information.)
- Changing expectations of employers as well as students about the value of traditional educational credentials

### **The Mission of Online Teaching and Learning at UAlbany**

The University at Albany online experience will reflect and reinforce our commitment to the highest quality experience for our students. Online courses and programs will be consistently challenging, rich in disciplinary content and thinking practice, interactive, inspiring, as well as personally empowering and professionally relevant.

Two foundational factors will inform and shape the work in the world of online teaching and learning at UAlbany.

- 1) Our responsibility to provide broad access to learning as a public university. Access to the University at Albany via online education will be an exceptional experience even for veteran online learners, and every course we develop will reflect the distinct research-driven mission of the University at Albany.
- 2) Our identity as a research institution. Our distinct role as a producer of new knowledge across a wide disciplinary, professional and interdisciplinary domain will be reflected in our efforts. Our work in online education will not be limited solely to the content of new knowledge, but should introduce students to the diverse approaches to inquiry involved in the scientific and creative realms.

### **Guiding Principles**

The following principles should guide decision-making in building and supporting UAlbany’s effort.

#### **Principle #1: Quality above all**

- a) The student experience in any UAlbany online course for university credit will be academically rigorous. Students in all online courses can expect an experience of the same or better quality as in a well-taught face-to-face course. In courses of small to moderate enrollments, this experience will include high levels of interaction with the online instructor and with other

students in the course. Pilots and experiments with larger enrollment courses will place a priority on effective design and creative use of technology to ensure student engagement, persistence, and high levels of student learning.

- b) Students can expect skilled instructors, readily available technical support and skillful, informed advising appropriate to their online courses and programs.
- c) Instructors who teach any UAlbany online course, whether for university credit or for continuing education, will have and use the skills and knowledge necessary for effective online instruction. They will have access to effective preparation in online course design and pedagogy, and in the use of relevant technologies for online teaching. Instructors will also have ready access to technical assistance, for themselves as well as for their students.
- d) Faculty will have access to a robust set of quality assessment and support processes, as they design and offer their courses.
- e) Both students and instructors should expect online course management tools that are easy to use, responsive to need, and highly reliable. A balance will be sought to ensure consistency in the online environment for students and faculty, coupled with a mechanism for regular re-evaluation and options for exploration of new technologies.
- f) Administrators at all levels should expect a course, program and faculty development process that is reliable and that meets the highest standards for university teaching and learning.

**Principle #2: Integration of Online Education**

- a) UAlbany online academic programs and courses for university credit will, especially from the perspective of students, be academically undifferentiated from non-online programs and courses. We will consciously avoid creating a two-tier academic environment in which online courses and programs have different standards.
- b) The scheduling of online courses *vis a vis* face-to-face courses will track to the reasoning and goals of the hosting department and academic program, the needs of students, and to the needs of the institution.
- c) UAlbany online academic programs and courses for university credit will be fully integrated into the work, practices, responsibilities and professional review of faculty. Credit-bearing online courses will be factored into faculty workloads the same as traditional teaching assignments, with the same considerations concerning class size, course level, etc. New policies may need to be developed to address the new ways faculty time might be affected.

**Principle #3: Strategic Decision-Making**

- a) We recognize that not all faculty members will be interested in online teaching and that this should be a voluntary activity. However, experience at UAlbany and elsewhere indicates that peer-to-peer professional development is highly effective in promoting innovation. We will enlist motivated faculty to serve as credible advocates for how online learning can be conducted to high standards. In considering new hires, applicant experience with or willingness to try

online teaching should be a factor, in order to promote our ability to develop coherent online course and program offerings.

- b) Decisions to create online versions of programs and courses for university diplomas and credit will be driven by considerations or criteria such as
  - Improved service to students (e.g., accelerated degree progress and completion, increased access)
  - Emerging needs in the academic market place – e.g. high needs programs.
  - Competitiveness of the University at Albany to recruit students to take the programs and courses.
  - The potential by the sponsoring unit to produce a high quality learning experience
  - Feasibility of success given available faculty, willingness to engage in online teaching, and resources in general
  - Availability of desirable opportunities (e.g. partnerships with other institutions).
- c) Institutional investment and other sources of administrative support will be visibly directed toward projects that align with these strategic criteria.

**Principle #4: Creativity, Experimentation and Flexibility**

- a) Individual instructors and academic units will, within the framework of strategic objectives, be encouraged to offer new online courses and/or programs that specifically help UAlbany advance its educational mission.
- b) Instructors will be supported in their attempts to teach and engage students in non-traditional formats and approaches, and to collect data on the effectiveness of these attempts
- c) Instructors and academic units will be encouraged to construct creative alliances with non-UAlbany individuals and institutions, when those alliances could improve UAlbany courses and programs and facilitate student progress.
- d) Instructors and academic units will be encouraged to find and adapt the most effective non-traditional learning materials and objects – for example, Khan Academy ([www.khanacademy.org](http://www.khanacademy.org)) ; Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and Open Educational Resources (OERs) more generally -- and experiment with adopting components that might enhance UAlbany courses and programs.

**Principle #5: Support for Research**

- a) Online teaching and learning will be used to enhance and support faculty research by providing faculty flexibility of time and geography
- b) Research on online teaching and learning will be fostered as part of development and evaluation of online teaching and learning projects
- c) Online teaching and learning will be used to promote the scholarship of teaching and learning among a wide range of faculty

- d) The University at Albany should be home to any SUNY-wide initiative on the effectiveness of online learning, given our infrastructure for research and the many publications and studies produced on this topic by our faculty. Partnering with other campuses with interest in this area (e.g. Empire State College) is also recommended.

## Recommendations

**1. Create (or adopt, eg., the Quality Scorecard framework) a set of principles, evaluation criteria and standards for guiding the development of online courses and programs.**

Make this rubric a part of all faculty preparation for offering online courses, and make similar, parallel rubrics a component of both peer review processes and student evaluation of their online course experiences.

**2. Create a robust new office of online teaching and learning with a professional director and staff dedicated to support for and delivery of online programs and courses, and for the faculty who participate.**

This entity needs to reside in Academic Affairs and report administratively at a level that will ensure its direct response to strategic academic decision-making. This entity also needs to inhabit a physical space commensurate with its function, which is to manage and coordinate a range of activities in support of Online Teaching and Learning, such as:

- Strategic management within Academic Affairs of online course and program development
- Working with Deans and Department chairs for developing online courses and programs and identifying and recruiting faculty to participate
- Management of funds toward development of appropriate projects, departments and faculty members
- Helping Identify project partners (both UAlbany and non-UAlbany)
- Coordinating with entities responsible for marketing and promotion of online courses and programs
- Participation in SUNY discussions
- Faculty/Instructor development (in collaboration with ITS and ITLAL)
- Course development, instructor feedback (in collaboration with ITS and ITLAL)
- Technical assistance (in collaboration with ITS and ITLAL)
- Coordination with academic administrative processes
- Coordination with student support services

**3. Create a small, diverse advisory group to work with the new office of online teaching and learning, the Office of the Provost and the Chief Information Officer in strategic planning, to ensure that**

- a wide range of ideas and perspectives informs the development of and investment in new online programs and courses
- needed courses and programs are identified, funded and put into the development pipeline
- needed policy changes and administrative practices occur (to resolve issues as they emerge with registration, scheduling, course designations, tuition, fees, assessment of prior learning, credit transfer, etc.)
- large, institutional, costly administrative-technology issues are addressed (e.g., identity management, Learning management systems)

- policies and guidelines are in place for collaborations with other SUNY campuses and with Open SUNY

**4. Conduct a market analysis to identify strategic opportunities for potential course and program development, such as**

- courses that would facilitate the transition from community college or high school to UAlbany
- master's degree programs where student residency is a barrier to classroom participation
- professional certificates
- degree programs with national or international demand, and which feature UAlbany's most visible strengths
- unsaturated market niches, where UAlbany has expertise and a head start in program development
- non-traditional venues, including non-credit education, that will increase our impact as a public institution of higher education

**5. Build strong campus-wide awareness and understanding of online teaching and learning, by conducting a slate of activities, such as**

- listening tours and visits with departments and programs to collect input as well as inform
- featured guest speakers and other events designed to communicate, educate, and invite discussion
- a set of web resources on the economics, pedagogy and research in OTL, in order to inform the faculty and students.
- conversations led by online faculty serving as role models, sharing successes

## **Objective 2: Creating a “One-Stop” Resource for Faculty: Course Development, Faculty Support, and Assessment**

### **Course Development & Structure**

At the University at Albany, the Online Course Development program (OCD) offered by the ITS Faculty Technology Resources area addresses many of the quality criteria articulated in the Sloan C Scorecard. The OCD course is required of instructors seeking to develop a course.

### **Recommendations**

1. A single one-stop office should be dedicated to online teaching and learning as an initial point of entry.
2. Academic units should be fully engaged with faculty seeking the online teaching experience, selecting logical sequences of courses to be developed online, and offer direct support to interested faculty.
3. Instructions to academic units and unit heads should be put into place that would direct faculty to the Online Course Development program and resources should they inquire about online teaching.
4. While online teaching and learning at UAlbany is primarily comprised of asynchronous teaching and learning, synchronous models are currently being tested by some faculty. A challenge for

synchronization is to develop a mechanism whereby a class meeting schedule can be designed for online classes via the Registrar.

5. Library staff dedicated solely to online teaching and learning should be designated to accommodate local faculty and students as well as those who are not on campus.
6. While Faculty Technology Resources coordinates with the Office of Disability Services to best meet the requirements of special-needs students, this area needs particular attention in providing expertise in accessibility to online content.

### **Teaching & Faculty Support**

The findings reported below represent data collected from a survey of UAlbany faculty conducted in February 2013. Of the 301 respondents, 46% reported that they had taught a blended or fully online course at UAlbany, and 49% reported that they had taught a Web-Enhanced course (i.e., a course that combined an online teaching experience with no reduced seat time). Further analysis of the survey responses will be conducted; the following preliminary recommendations are offered based on early discussion and analysis.

#### **Recommendations**

1. Faculty perception that they can apply the same teaching techniques used in the face-to-face classroom to online teaching is addressed in OCD course. It should be made clear at all levels that different teaching and learning strategies must be used to engage students in the online classroom.
2. Faculty who have taught online indicate that they have had adequate technical support throughout the development and teaching processes. There is a need, however, for robust ongoing pedagogical support beyond the OCD course.
3. If more faculty are to be engaged in quality online teaching, greater value needs to be placed on the work that is required, as well as greater technical and pedagogical support.

### **Assessment**

There is no formal process to review intended learning outcomes at the course level, at the University at Albany, although it is expected that some faculty do engage in this process on a regular basis. A study was undertaken comparing face-to-face versus online classes at UAlbany (same class, same instructor, comparable course time) to determine what differences, if any, exist now. Preliminary review has suggested that there is little difference in student outcomes or SIRS ratings. There were, however, observable differences in student demographics. The following are preliminary recommendations, pending further analysis, based on this review.

#### **Recommendations**

1. Student focus groups of “high users” and/or “low users” and/or “no users” of online courses should be arranged to answer targeted questions such as why students chose online versus face-to-face courses and what barriers they see within each format.
2. New opportunities for outreach and course development should be developed for various populations of students who have not taken advantage of or had access to online courses.

### Objective 3: Supporting and Engaging Students

A review of services provided to online students at the University at Albany has revealed that many of the services are not altered or specialized for online students. Indeed, the vast majority of issues (including direct advisement, availability of course material, access to IT and other general support services) are currently handled in the same way that they are resolved for non-online students.

- Additionally, many of the “engagement” items (i.e. student training, finding help, and online communication) are currently handled at the course level by the individual instructors and as such are not necessarily consistent across courses or disciplines.
- Pre-enrollment advisement and support was found to be considerably lacking for students who enroll in an online course. There is minimal instruction/support at any point prior to the course opening.
- Finally, there is no standardization across online courses nor is there a centralized place for online students to meet, ask questions, or receive assistance beyond those already in place for traditional students.

#### **Recommendations**

Online learning is not simply an extension of the traditional classroom, but instead is itself a new way of learning and engaging students. Therefore, the University should be proactive as well as responsive when it comes to engaging students in this environment. This requires development of a support structure that reflects the unique demands of this learning style and does not rely solely on what works for traditional on-campus students.

#### **1: Identify an administrative model that best meets the needs of online students.**

*Action Step 1.1:* Develop an inventory of service needs that occur within a student “life cycle” (i.e. admission, registration, advisement, graduation). Based on the moments of high need, evaluate what level of support UAlbany wants to provide for online students (same as current students, more flexible hours, etc?)

*Action Step 1.2:* Decide which model is most appropriate to meet needs identified in action step 1.1

- Centralized: Create one designated area/office for experts in administration of online programs.
- Hybrid: Integrate aspects of both centralized and decentralized models. Focus on administrative service moments that will be high touch areas for online students. Develop experts within the current administrative offices to serve as point for online students while also developing an online contact point/office.

#### **2: Develop a mechanism(s) by which students are advised about the admissions process, academic responsibilities, necessary individual motivations/commitment and technological requirements of online learning *before* they attempt an online program.**

*Action Step 2.1:* Create a position for a dedicated online advisor/admissions counselor who has online learning expertise to provide one-stop support for prospective students.

- Online student services center (similar to summer session)



- Ways to advise online: Skype, phone, email, text, IM, live chat, "Ask an advisor"
- Virtual open houses

*Action Step 2.2:* Create a web page: "Online Learning Start Here". Link to share information with prospective students about (not limited to): Instructions, Admissions information, Program Availability, Technology requirements, Online lounge, Financial Aid, Advisement, Library services, information for International students

**3: Provide students with the technological training and resources necessary to begin and successfully navigate online course(s).**

*Action Step 3.1:* Develop interactive online orientation for students (mandatory)

*Action Step 3.2:* Develop virtual course walk through

- Keep open so students can test their technology set up (upload, test tech, etc)
- Will assist ITS in helping students

*Action Step 3.3:* Determine what technological support should be available outside the traditional 9-to-5 framework (e.g., weekends, nights, 24/7, 18/6)

**4: Ensure students have access to support services such as academic advising, financial aid, Career Services, International Education, tutoring, registration, etc. throughout their academic career.**

*Action Step 4.1:* Establish UAlbany vision for student support for online students, (see *Action Step 1.1*) and determine:

- How much can be "pushed out" via static text vs. human interaction?
- What type of online culture do we want?
- How/Should we provide advisement 24/7 – MyUAlbany, etc.
- Human interaction- do ALL services need to be 24/7?
- Does developmental model of advising follow online? If not, what?
- When should departments take over online student advising? How will they be supported?

*Action Step 4.2:* Develop online "Landing Spot" for fully online students (MyUAlbany), in addition to the prospective student webpage. Include information about online learning, key dates, online student lounge.

*Action Step 4.3:* Determine Financial Aid parameters/needs for online programs

*Action Step 4.4:* Explore options for engaged learning (i.e., internships, study abroad, etc.)

**5: Create a cohesive, consistent online environment and community for online students.**

*Action Step 5.1:* Conduct focus groups of students and faculty to determine best presentation of courses and interest in engagement in an online community. Ask about standard shells, accessibility, consistency, tech requirements, community aspects

*Action Step 5.2:* Make online content easily accessible and usable via mobile devices.

*Action Step 5.3:* Explore advantages and challenges of adopting ONE standard of technology (i.e. Blackboard) versus integrating newest technology options (i.e. Moodle)

*Action Step 5.4:* Determine if there should be a standard shell for course content, including standard intro, welcome, structure, colors/design, branding look, ways to integrate different technologies

Additional recommendations that are potential helpful with the expansion of online learning:

- The University should connect (or remain connected) with other online institutions to explore best practices (Empire, Excelsior).
- UAlbany should commit to ensuring that administrative components are in place prior to launching an online UG program (i.e. Financial Aid).

## Objective 4: Ensuring Technology Support

### Current technology environment

The University meets technology security, privacy, delivery, support, and mission-critical standards as defined the Sloan C “Quality Scorecard.” The centrally managed IT infrastructure needed to support OTL is considered mission-critical and is generally well supported. Information Technology Services and University Libraries have established policies and procedures governing information security and privacy, identity and access management, responsible use of IT services that ensure integrity and validity of information within centrally administered technology systems and services. IT systems and services that are centrally administered and managed can all be considered reliable and stable. ITS and University Libraries employ processes to maintain and upgrade existing systems and services to keep current with standards for a robust infrastructure to support OTL. Finally, management of all centrally administered IT systems and services includes regular backup routines and disaster recovery mechanisms.

Nonetheless, some existing components are in need of improved management. Certain new capabilities have been identified and work is underway to examine options to deploy some new services. In looking to the future, processes to build the infrastructure by exploring and incorporating emerging technologies and innovative OTL activities should be further honed and operationalized to enable scalability across the university.

### The technology tools and capabilities needed by students and faculty in the online learning environment, including any new tools and support, and relative priority.

ITS and the Libraries provide an array of services and tools to support faculty, staff, and student development and use. Based on several informal surveys of teaching colleagues and students to several common themes emerged which informed the development of a faculty survey, as well as the expansion of a previously-conducted survey of student experience with Blackboard. The faculty survey has recently closed and the student survey will conclude later this semester. Results will further inform the issues and recommendations, a preliminary list of which follows.

### Issues

A number of key issues emerged from discussions held with faculty and students and consultation with UAlbany technology and library staff. The issues listed below are preliminary and may be expanded or modified when the data from the faculty and student surveys are received and analyzed.

1. Create a home for OTL and a director to coordinate OTL at UAlbany.
2. Identify the players and how they fit together (include at least Academic Affairs, ITS, ITLAL, Libraries).
3. Invest in infrastructure (technology and people) resources and policies.
4. Pay attention to the flexibility and constraints of systems and policies.

5. Working with other partners or participants outside UAlbany who use other technologies and policies.
6. Procedures for evaluation of new technologies.
7. Communications across the university—who, what, where, when, why, how.
8. Ability for faculty to experiment.

**Recommendations:**

The following are preliminary recommendations. Additional recommendations will likely emerge from further analysis of the faculty and student surveys:

1. Create a 24/7 Help Desk or Hotline.
2. Make Blackboard as friendly and seamless as possible while continuing to enhance its capabilities.
3. Provide opportunities for faculty, staff, and students to explore emerging or alternative technologies and associated innovative curricular and pedagogical initiatives.
4. Identify silos of exploration; encourage sharing of planning, activities, and results of innovative efforts; and communicate results.
5. Engage in further evaluation and selection of an enterprise web conferencing service.
6. Move forward with further evaluation, selection, and implementation of an enterprise Multimedia Asset Management system by ITS.
7. Move forward with further evaluation, selection, and implementation of an enterprise Lecture-Capture system by ITS.
8. Establish a standard vocabulary used in teaching, technical support, registration systems.
9. Modify the registration system to indicate what format a class is (i.e., online, blended or hybrid, web-enhanced).
10. Make use of faculty interest in sharing their expertise and passion with OTL.

## Membership of the Working Groups

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