

## **A Strategic Approach to University Online Programs:**

### **Engaging Faculty and Staff with the OLC Quality Scorecard** (based on U of M online benchmarking reports)

Minnesota eLearning Summit, Minneapolis, MN, July 2016

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**U of M Online Background:** Since the mid-1990s, the University of Minnesota has offered classes and later full academic programs through online and blended delivery. The University now offers more than 40 online and blended learning programs through its five campuses, providing educational access to both local and distance learners. Over 1,500 courses are available online. During the 2014-15 academic year, more than 21,000 students took at least one online course.

**Benchmarking Project:** In keeping with the University's efforts to advance academic excellence and continuous program improvement across all delivery formats, during January – July 2015, Center for Educational Innovation staff engaged U of M academic and central support units in benchmarking the University's online and blended programs against the best practices in the field using Online Learning Consortium's (OLC) *Quality Scorecard for the Administration of Online Programs*. The benchmarking project plan includes three major stages:

- 1) Conducting an internal review of U of M online and blended programs and the corresponding central support services, using the aggregated data to identify strengths and opportunities;
- 2) Working with the U of M Online Steering Committee and other stakeholders to identify the highest priorities for U of M strategic improvement and investments; and
- 3) Engaging the Provost's Office, Center for Educational Innovation, other central support units (especially OIT, Libraries, Disability Resource Center), and academic units in the implementation of the recommended priorities.

**Methodology:** Because the administration of online and blended programs is highly decentralized at the University of Minnesota, the project staff determined that it was critical to meet individually with each of the major units offering online and blended programs, and ask them to use the Scorecard to assign values to the different indicators from the perspective of their program. Central support units, in turn, were asked to assign values on the basis of what their unit provided to the University community as well as their understanding of the current state of specific areas such as accessibility.

The ratings were aggregated to produce averages across the U of M System for each individual indicator as well as the nine major thematic sections of the scorecard. Finally, participating units were asked to review the lowest ranking indicators and select their top five priorities for improvement.

### **The initial benchmarking report recommended the following next steps:**

1. Engage the Digital Campus Steering Committee in establishing task groups to produce a 1-2 year operational plan to address each of the *five strategic cluster areas* which include institutional support, faculty development, program viability/capacity/marketing, accessibility/universal design, and technology.
2. Consider using Scorecard results at the academic unit level.
3. Establish ongoing continuous improvement process.
4. Share best practices for program administration.
5. Produce and implement plan to communicate availability of services.
6. Examine the best division of responsibility between academic and central units including provision of resources.
7. Identify key policies.

**Creation of Two Online Programs Task Groups by Vice Provost:** Based on these recommendations, Rebecca Ropers-Huilman, Vice Provost for Faculty and Academic Affairs, charged two task groups to address the highest priority indicators.

The **Online Programs Institutional Support Task Group** was charged with making recommendations relating to:

- Defining and communicating the strategic value of online learning to the University and its stakeholders
- A governance structure enabling systematic/continuous improvement of online education administration
- A process (and resources needed) to assess program viability and academic unit capacity
- University-wide marketing resources / enrollment management services needed specifically for online programming
- Specific processes for planning and allocating resources to support online programs
- Resources needed to adequately support the U of M online educational mission

The **Online Programs Faculty Support Task Group** was charged with making recommendations relating to:

- Institutional guidelines to ensure faculty receive training, assistance, and support for course development and teaching online (including recommendations on the appropriate mix of academic unit and central unit services)
- Clear standards for faculty engagement and expectations concerning online teaching (e.g., response time)
- Accessibility guidelines including information that should be provided to students, training for student service workers, implementation of universal design principles from the earliest planning stages when developing new or revised online or blended learning, and the adherence to these type of standards (including usability tests)
- Process to evaluate the effectiveness of current and emerging technologies for the online course environment to support the achievement of learning outcomes and delivery of course content, and then communicate these findings and encourage adoption.

**Process:** For each of the indicators above, the Task Group documented the current state, outlined a desired future state and provided a series of concrete recommendations. The groups recognized that much has been achieved at the University in the past 20 years that the U of M has offered online programs. At the same time, it was acknowledged that the University and its academic units could benefit from a strategic approach to developing, implementing and evaluating online programs. With this approach: a) online programming can directly serve the University's strategic plan including the goal of leveraging our existing strengths as a place-based land grant research institution to reach geographically diverse student audiences, enhancing the U of M's national and international reputation; and b) better coordination of resources and policies can support this work more effectively.

**Current Status:** The Online Programs Institutional and Faculty Support Task Groups submitted their final reports to Vice Provost Ropers-Huilman in June 2016. The recommendations are now under active consideration by senior U of M academic administration.