

An Assessment of E-Learning Activities at Northwestern State University

*A report by Southern Regional Education Board's
Distance Learning Policy Laboratory*

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**Northwestern State University
SREB Assessment Team Report
May 2005**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In September 2004, Northwestern State University (NSU) and the Louisiana Board of Regents engaged the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) to conduct a comprehensive assessment of e-learning initiatives at NSU. The evaluation of NSU's e-learning activities served two purposes: first, to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the use and effectiveness of e-learning instructional programs and services at NSU, (including strengths and weaknesses, and recommendations for improvement) and second, utilizing the resulting evaluation process to develop a model evaluation process that will be of value to other colleges and universities in Louisiana and to the Louisiana Board Regents.

Over a six-month period, SREB used a team approach to undertake the evaluation. The team was comprised of individuals with expertise in various aspects of e-learning. The primary evaluation areas were: Administration & Governance; Finance & Facilities; Curriculum & Instruction; Libraries & Learning Resources; Student Services; and Evaluation & Assessment. A summary of recommendations in each focus area follows.

Administration & Governance

- To begin the important process of changing the learning culture at NSU, a comprehensive strategic plan for e-learning should be developed and adopted by the NSU community.
- To effectively deal with more immediate administrative and operational challenges in e-learning and to serve as a bridge while the strategic plan is developed, a campus-wide e-learning advisory committee should be established.
- The new e-learning advisory committee should conduct an assessment of existing state, system and institutional policies to ascertain those policies that are “barriers,” perceived or real, to e-learners.
- The president or his designee should assess administrative service units across NSU as these services relate to e-learners.
- NSU should broaden, extend and strengthen relationships and collaborations with other institutions and agencies in Louisiana and selectively outside the state.

Finance & Facilities

- An immediate plan and solution should be developed for establishing a stable, robust and scalable IT infrastructure for NSU.
- NSU leadership should seek additional support from the University of Louisiana System, Board of Regents and legislature upon completion and submission of its e-learning strategic plan.
- The Student Technology Fee should be reviewed and consideration given to how it might be more effectively used to meet student needs.

- As a way to increase support for e-learning programs and services, NSU should consider alternative “revenue sharing” models that could be negotiated with academic units and that would share tuition revenues for e-learning activities.
- NSU should work with local community organizations, business and industry, and other “outlets” to help bridge the “digital divide” in rural areas.

Curriculum & Instruction

- Training in the use of the Blackboard Course Management System (CMS) should be mandatory, not simply made available, before faculty are given access to CMS accounts for their classes.
- Scalable support strategies designed for larger numbers of faculty and students are more desirable than the difficult task of supporting any number of “one-of” courses. It is recommended that NSU move toward a stronger central support role through the Office of Electronic and Continuing Education (ECE).
- Principles of Course Redesign, as presented in the work of the Center for Academic Transformation (www.theNCAT.org), should be incorporated into curriculum planning for e-learning at NSU.
- Training in online pedagogy should be an integral part of faculty professional development, not just training in the technical functions of Blackboard.
- NSU should consider whether there is student and faculty interest in “hybrid” courses.

Libraries & Learning Resources

- The library director vacancy should be filled as soon as possible.
- Library staff should connect with faculty in traditional and online courses to deliver course-integrated information, fluency instruction and assistance.
- NSU should aggressively and systematically develop both in-person and virtual services via the library.
- Library services need to be marketed to e-learners more effectively.
- The library should partner with the Office of Electronic and Continuing Education and other logical units of the university.
- Library staff should assist faculty with identification and provision of digital content.
- NSU should move forward with physical changes to the library with the greatest potential for positive impact.

Student Services

- NSU should work to establish stronger connections between ECE student services and campus-based student services.
- In collaboration with other student services personnel, ECE should explore and create scalable service models.
- The technical support operation and its reporting structure needs to be revisited and restructured.
- NSU should work to build student community through online interaction.
- It is essential that all members of the NSU community take careful measures to ensure student privacy.

Evaluation & Assessment

- NSU, through the office of ECE, should develop a plan and implement an ongoing market needs assessment.
- In cooperation with the Office of Planning and Assessment and faculty leadership, ECE should take the lead to improve the Online Student Course Evaluation instrument.
- ECE should develop and administer a student “Drop Survey” to determine the reasons why some students do not persist in online courses, and use this information to improve services.
- Improvements in the student satisfaction and faculty needs surveys could yield useful information for planning purposes.
- NSU should implement an Online Course Quality Assurance Process.

Northwestern State University has a long and proud heritage of service to the northern third of Louisiana, a history of academic quality, a central component and pillar of the Natchitoches community and a commitment to service. More recently, NSU has a growing record of success in the emerging e-learning “market” and has with limited resources, established a leadership role in e-learning in Louisiana. The team found a genuine love of the institution by the faculty and staff we spoke with during the visit and a real desire to see the university flourish in the coming years. Like many other institutions around the South, particularly those in more rural areas with a traditional focus on teacher education and training, the challenges of responding to the changing needs and interests of learners is all too real. As more young, and not so young, learners move away from more traditional majors and residential learning experiences, and seek more convenience, NSU has responded well. Despite limited resources, including human, technical and financial, the university has established an exemplary record in reaching out to the changing student clientele, expanding activities at off-campus centers and pursuing e-learning initiatives. The record is a commendable one.

INTRODUCTION

Northwestern State University (NSU) has embraced electronic learning (e-learning) as a means by which to reach Louisiana residents in the northwestern sector of the state. Through the efforts of individual academic units and the office of Electronic and Continuing Education (ECE), NSU has experienced rapid growth in electronic courses and enrollments over the last several years. This is an indication of growing acceptance of the instructional modality by students and faculty in the NSU community. As a pioneer of e-learning in Louisiana, NSU is poised to build on its past successes and recent growth and provide continued leadership for e-learning in Louisiana. At the same time, there are challenges within the institution that must be addressed in order for e-learning to reach its potential. These challenges encompass all major administrative and instructional areas, and require sustained commitment of leadership both at NSU and at the state level.

In September 2004, NSU and the Louisiana Board of Regents engaged the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) to conduct a comprehensive assessment of e-learning initiatives at NSU. The evaluation of NSU's e-learning activities served two purposes: first, to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the use and effectiveness of e-learning instructional programs and services at NSU, (including strengths and weaknesses, and recommendations for improvement); and second, utilizing the resulting evaluation process to develop a model evaluation process that will be of value to other colleges and universities in Louisiana and to the Louisiana Board Regents.

Over a six month period, SREB used a team approach to undertake the evaluation. The team (see Appendix A) was comprised of individuals with expertise in various aspects of e-learning. The primary evaluation areas were: Administration & Governance; Finance & Facilities; Curriculum & Instruction; Libraries & Learning Resources; Student Services; and Evaluation & Assessment. (see Appendix B) The SREB Assessment Team (team) relied upon e-learning guidelines published by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), SREB, the Louisiana Board of Regents, and the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET).

The team conducted an on-campus visit February 1-2, 2005. In addition, course evaluations were conducted by the Monterey Institute for Technology in Education using criteria developed through the Online Course Evaluation Project (OCEP). This effort was coordinated through WCET's EduTools initiative.

ADMINISTRATION AND GOVERNANCE

Overview

An integrated and effective e-learning effort requires many elements, including a supportive administration, an appropriate governance structure, the acceptance of (or at least recognition by the university community) and commitment to e-learning objectives, and recognition of the value of e-learning. These elements are not easily or quickly achieved by most institutions, particularly the “cultural shift” of recognizing and embracing e-learning across the academic community. Northwestern State University has made significant strides in establishing both the necessary structures to support its e-learning activities and, more importantly, in creating a climate of support for its e-learning mission. There is still much work to do. However, the challenge is exacerbated by limited fiscal resources, limited personnel (a dedicated but seriously overworked administrative staff), limited technology, and limited support and integration of services across the university. Some of these challenges can be addressed in the short term and the team makes several suggestions below that can be acted upon quickly. Others are more long-term in nature and will require shifts in priorities, assignments and the way business is conducted. All of these changes, both short-term and long-term, must be couched in an e-learning strategic plan, developed from a university-wide process that will establish a clear set of objectives and directions. While there are elements of a plan in various documents and certainly, in the views and opinions of those the team met with during its visit, there is no single document or plan that the university community can point to or utilize. Such a plan is needed. This strategic plan would serve as the “blueprint” or “roadmap” for e-learning at NSU. More importantly, it would signal to the University of Louisiana system, the Board of Regents and the legislature NSU’s commitment to a broader statewide role in e-learning.

Changing the Culture

There is clear evidence of the growing importance of e-learning and its broader acceptance in the university community. At all administrative levels and within the faculty and staff the team met with, e-learning was valued or, at the very least, was recognized, as an important activity within NSU. There is a good sense of direction. From Board members to the Chancellor and the executive management of NSU, the institution values this effort. But often policy and practice “get in the way” of the commitment to e-learning as evidenced by the decreasing morale of overworked staff, the inexplicable requirement of requiring office hours, in the office, when the spirit of involvement is easily addressed by “virtual” office hours from home or any other location, and the inability to complete a full array of transactions online.

The most oft-repeated concern or challenge was the lack of resources, fiscal, human and technical. There is clear evidence of such shortages, most immediately the personnel issue. An attitude of “as long as the systems runs nothing changes” is a formula for disaster. Key staff are overworked and are attempting to provide both leadership and operational support (e.g. conducting on-site counseling and registration at remote locations after a full day’s work on campus). The most immediate concern was the clear fatigue and stress on people and processes, which demand and growth in e-learning and off-campus programming is placing on the existing administrative staff. This fatigue is wearing and morale is down. During one of the meetings

with the team, it was suggested that the lack of budgetary support from the state could lead to a “scaling back” of e-learning. Such an action would be, in the team’s view, disastrous and would send the wrong message to the NSU community and to the state. The budget issue must be relieved through shifts of support, even on a short-term basis. The team believes some of these shortages can be addressed by revamping some administrative duties and responsibilities, by shifting existing personnel or positions, in part or in full, to support the e-learning operation, and by considering creative fiscal approaches such as revenue-sharing (discussed in a later section).

These suggestions will not address the larger budgetary challenge of the new state budget formula or the change in selective admissions, which could further erode tuition revenue in the coming years. The team believes that e-learning can help to mitigate these fiscal challenges, although e-learning is not a panacea. Indeed, expanding e-learning will require tough decisions to be made on the reallocation of resources. But the team believes a strong case can be made to the state that NSU is well positioned and could, with additional support from the state, take on a statewide leadership role in addressing the learning needs of Louisianans. There is a void at the state level in this regard and NSU becoming Louisiana’s “adult friendly” institution, reaching out to key constituencies with e-learning programs, both existing and new programs, and enhanced services for extended learners, is in the team’s view, an attractive idea. To make this case, NSU will need to make internal adjustments, revise certain policies and procedures and extend its services in more creative ways. It will require adjustments in policy, at both the institutional and state levels, and more importantly, it will demand that many existing practices be adjusted or changed.

Recommendations for Improvement

1. ***To begin the important process of changing the learning culture at NSU, a comprehensive strategic plan for e-learning should be developed and adopted by the NSU community.*** The process should begin immediately through the establishment of a strategic planning committee or group. This group should have broad representation from all constituencies of NSU, both internal and external. This group should be a presidential-level activity that will focus on developing a strategic plan, and subsequently a business plan, for e-learning at NSU. It should lay out what NSU wants to achieve, how to achieve it, and what is required to achieve it.
2. ***To effectively deal with more immediate administrative and operational challenges in e-learning and to serve as a bridge while the strategic plan is developed, a campus-wide e-learning advisory committee should be established.*** This group, with broad representation from administration, faculty, staff and students, would be designed as an action-oriented group to weigh the recommendations and suggestions in this report and to bring to executive leadership of NSU suggested ways to make short-term changes in the e-learning operation.
3. ***The new e-learning advisory committee should conduct an assessment of existing state, system and institutional policies to ascertain those policies that are “barriers,” perceived or real, to e-learners.*** At the institutional level, policies should be adjusted to accommodate off-campus e-learners. In some instances, the problems are not policy but

practice and these must be addressed as well. For example, workload, class size, compensation for e-learning, etc. need to be evaluated and adjusted. The current practice of “capping” some e-learning courses (i.e., limiting the section size to fewer students than traditional face-to-face courses) must be addressed so that e-learning can be scaled to meet increasing demand.

4. ***The president or his designee should assess administrative service units across NSU as these services relate to e-learners.*** There was evidence during the visit of a lack of understanding about supporting e-learners, particularly remote learners, with an “8 a.m. to 5 p.m.” mentality. While it is not suggested that office hours be extended, moving more transactions and services into an online environment can help all learners. In some respects, this represents part of the cultural “shift” that must be engendered across campus.
5. ***NSU should broaden, extend and strengthen relationships and collaborations with other institutions and agencies in Louisiana and selectively outside the state.*** These relationships include existing ones, such as with the Consortium for Education, Research and Technology of North Louisiana (CERT), Louisiana’s *Electronic Campus*, SREB’s *Electronic Campus*, and others such as the Sloan Consortium (no fee to participate). These collaborations can help to ensure that students get courses and services they need and can “expand” NSU’s service without additional increases in support.

In the end, the continuing and real challenge NSU leadership faces is establishing across the broader community a sense of the value and importance of e-learning to the long-term health and vitality of the university. We believe there is general understanding, strong in some places and weak in others. Leadership must help move this effort forward and continue to change the “culture” of NSU in the coming years.

FACILITIES AND FINANCE

Overview

Whatever longer term objectives NSU establishes for e-learning, facilities and more importantly the financing of e-learning, will take center stage. No plan, however well conceived, can be successfully deployed without adequate support. As noted earlier, e-learning can help but it is not the “silver bullet” to eliminating reduced state support. At the same time, the development of a strategic plan can help make the budgetary case and that single step and recommendation remains at the forefront of actions the team believes NSU must take immediately.

In some respects, facilities for e-learning are not the real challenge at NSU. The team found no evidence of a lack of facilities on campus, but rather found the campus to be attractive, well-kept and providing a comfortable learning environment. More to the point is the challenge of technical infrastructure to support e-learning at NSU. Here the team found challenges, with broadband issues on campus (creating capacity and access challenges for e-learners) and significant “speed” issues for many e-learners with home access at speeds below 56k that make

many of the emerging features of e-learning courses problematic. This challenge was mentioned by several NSU personnel, i.e. that bandwidth and computer access issues present challenges to the residents in rural northern Louisiana and to the university trying to serve them. While the university can solve its own network infrastructure problems, how will the connectivity needs in rural northern Louisiana be solved? There is no immediate solution the team can offer to this challenge in outlying rural areas, which make up part of the NSU service area. Indeed this is a challenge understood at the state level (and nationally) and remains part of the “digital divide” that continues to grow. First and foremost, NSU must address challenges on campus concerning capacity. While on campus for the visit, the team experienced first-hand the capacity issue as the NSU campus suffered low bandwidth problems. While this problem was likely a temporary one, large scale online teaching and learning demands a robust, reliable and fast network on campus. The lack of such a network will cause problems for online teaching and learning, and could easily scuttle all efforts to move NSU into a leadership position in e-learning in the state. The team offers some suggestions below on matters relating to infrastructure.

On financial matters, there are two levels of challenge: state support and institutional use of support from the state (and other sources). With the former, NSU has some, albeit limited, ability to impact state budget formulae (although the team suggested earlier that establishing NSU as the state leader in e-learning could impact funding). With the latter, NSU leadership can more directly effect changes within the budgetary and allocation processes. We believe this can and should be done.

Adding to the fiscal challenge is the current reliance on external grant support for central services. While NSU should be commended for successful efforts in securing governmental and foundation grants for supporting various e-learning activities (and other services that impact indirectly e-learning), too often the “ebb and flow” of external support means a similar “ebb and flow” in e-learning operations. Rather than serving as seed money for a particular effort or activity, the conclusion of a grant often means the termination or significant reduction of that service, person or activity. Some central or core activities must be retained or resources reallocated to continue the activity. This situation, the team believes, requires creative management and the reallocation of resources to support the growing e-learning activity.

During the visit, the team spent time considering the Student Technology Fee, and, in particular, how this fee was used and, more importantly, how it might be used. While it is clear that this fee has supported the “SOS” help desk, the nature of support (often questions are related to Blackboard use), demands on supervision (workers supervised by one unit but report to another unit), limited hours, and very limited scale of work suggests that alternative strategies be considered. This raises a policy question about the use of the fee proceeds and whether different arrangements (e.g. outsourcing the help desk) could be more attractive, i.e. less costly and more productive.

On this latter point, a growing number of institutions have found outsourcing to be an economical and effective strategy in providing enhanced support for a variety of e-learning services. In many instances, outsourcing versus growing or establishing from within provides greater opportunities to use limited resources while providing better service. These opportunities should be considered.

Recommendations for Improvement

1. ***An immediate plan and solution should be developed for establishing a stable, robust and scaleable IT infrastructure for NSU.*** While the team was pleased to see immediate action to “patch” the computing system bandwidth problem that occurred earlier in the year, a complete review and assessment of the current computing infrastructure and the needs to refurbish or expand the system to meet growing e-learning demands should be a high priority.
2. ***NSU leadership should seek additional support from the University of Louisiana System, Board of Regents and legislature upon completion and submission of its e-learning strategic plan.*** The development of the strategic plan should establish the pathway for NSU’s e-learning efforts in the state and should define support needed to accomplish the strategic objectives. The case can and should be made with state leadership.
3. ***The Student Technology Fee should be reviewed and consideration given to how it might be more effectively used to meet student needs.*** The stated purpose of the fee, “dedicated to the acquisition, installation, maintenance and efficient use of state-of-the-art technology solely for the purpose of supporting and improving student life and learning, and to better prepare students for the workplace,” has been narrowly defined operationally such that the fee is not fully achieving its objective. The team believes the fee can be more effectively used to support technology at NSU.
4. ***As a way to increase support for e-learning programs and services, NSU should consider alternative “revenue sharing” models that could be negotiated with academic units and that would share tuition revenues for e-learning activities.*** These funds could create an investment “fund” to expand course offerings. There are a myriad number of strategies, formulas and approaches to revenue sharing that institutions have adopted. No specific formula is suggested but the team does believe that a strong case could be made for establishing a revenue sharing approach as a means to expand current programming levels.
5. ***NSU should work with local community organizations, business and industry, and other “outlets” to help bridge the “digital divide” in rural areas.*** Local public libraries, public schools, churches, community service facilities and businesses often have computing technology and capacity that could be used to support online learners. This “outreach” effort could make a significant difference to many rural and remote learners.

The financial challenges at NSU are real and with the changes in admissions requirements, and consequent impact on enrollments, the fiscal issues will become more acute. It is, in the team’s view, an opportunity to establish NSU’s e-learning programming, as noted earlier, and to effect change in the level of state support that would be needed to extend NSU’s e-learning mission statewide. The recent Adult Learning Task Force report creates, in the team’s view, an opportunity for NSU to make changes that can have a long-term impact on the university.

CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

Overview

Much has been accomplished in e-learning at NSU, despite the limitation of available funding and the size of the staff in the Office of Electronic and Continuing Education (ECE). For online instruction, most decisions regarding curriculum and instruction are decentralized – within academic units at NSU. There are challenges under the current model of curriculum and faculty development, which the team believes can be addressed in some innovative and cost effective ways.

Curriculum planning

The process for deciding what NSU programs and courses will be offered online and why is not clear. It was reported to the team that faculty members typically make suggestions to their college dean about putting a course online. The focus then becomes individual courses and the interests of only early adopter faculty. While this is a viable way to begin online instruction, it does not scale well. A degree or certificate program rather than course approach allows for a more focused application of scarce resources and enables broader participation of support units across the university. Units such as the library, technical support, student services, admissions, advising and faculty development would then be able to develop and apply cost effective services and strategies to support degree programs much more readily than for individual courses by individual faculty members scattered across the university. Models of student support, online instruction, faculty development, course development, marketing and technical infrastructure would develop and enable scalable solutions.

There seems to be a disconnect between having a starting point of individual faculty members wanting to put their individual course online and the stated mission of ECE that includes meeting “the needs of a diverse adult population” and outreach to rural areas and satellite campuses. Higher education students have been shown to enter programs that have clear beginning and ending dates or terms and that lead to a degree or certification. They tend not to value taking an individual course online. How will NSU determine which course(s), or preferably, program(s) in which to invest its resources? Why put a program or individual courses online? The process for requesting support and seeking permission should include the presentation of a rationale for offering online courses or those using different technologies before course development begins. The rationale may also be used when course changes are taken to curriculum committees for approval. The rationale should answer at least the following questions:

- *Who is to be served and why?* Are the persons to be served current students or previously unserved or underserved populations? Why should these persons be served? Are they persons who could not otherwise get this course or who would prefer the convenience offered by taking the course or program online?

- *What are the learner characteristics?* Are they non-traditional college students who are working full-time? Are they adult students? Are they persons with disabilities? Are they persons with access to an Internet connected computer? Are they interested only in taking an individual course, or are they seeking an undergraduate or graduate degree or certificate?
- *Where are the learners to be served?* Are they on campus, in the community served by the university, scattered throughout the state, or are they beyond state borders?
- *What is the best method to reach these learners and give them access?* Given the description of the learners above, would offering courses via the Internet or interactive two-way TV be the best way to provide them access? What media would be appropriate for the course being planned? Should a combination of media and face-to-face instruction be used to provide the best educational experience for the learners and to deliver the course/program content to these learners?

Course Development and Faculty Development

NSU's current approach to course development and faculty development is summarized below, based on a description prepared by ECE for the EduTools online course evaluations.

NSU prepares classroom faculty to become online course instructors and developers through a series of training courses (workshops, seminars, voluntary training, etc.). ECE's facilitated training introduces each instructor to the pedagogy and methodology of facilitating peer-to-peer and student-to-instructor communication and interaction, including how best to use threaded discussions, the digital drop box, and group functionality within the CMS. NSU training on how to maximize the online experience is presented in a modular format. The modules combine face-to-face training with an asynchronous web component and are offered multiple times each academic year from mid-August through mid-May.

NSU prepares classroom faculty to build an effective online course from scratch. Each participant receives instruction on how to create an online course using Blackboard, although the training could be used with any CMS with minor modification. Faculty are also trained on how to moderate the completed course effectively. Departments assign course stewards (trained by ECE staff), and the faculty are provided with one-on-one support during the course creation process.

Models of Faculty Support Using Existing Resources

Interviews with NSU faculty and college administrators revealed a great deal of enthusiasm for offering courses and programs online and for teaching online. They highly praised Darlene Williams and the ECE staff for the support they provide and their willingness to take on the challenges of supporting online instruction. However, a common concern expressed by faculty was that the ECE is understaffed.

Without doubt, every institution that is growing the number of faculty teaching online courses and the numbers of online courses offered has the same challenge—how to support faculty development, course development, and students. For most institutions, it is desirable to have at least one full-time instructional designer. At the same time, there are existing personnel resources at NSU that would be helpful, if not essential, to a broader scale faculty development program. Some institutions have looked inward for these resources and have developed programs and models of support that could be implemented at NSU. Some examples follow.

- Use faculty experienced in teaching online as instructors in the faculty development program. They may not need to be paid, but should be given recognition and rewards that are valued in the NSU faculty culture and which might contribute to achieving tenure and promotion. Experienced faculty are invaluable in telling others what works and what does not, and for sharing shortcuts and strategies they have developed for managing online courses and the increased workload that comes with teaching online.
- Employ undergraduate and graduate students as instructional assistants in online classes. Seek students in that major who have recently successfully completed the course. Many times student internships and practicums can be crafted for this purpose. The faculty teaching the courses with this support will benefit as well as the students.
- Technically capable undergraduate students can be employed by the ECE office as technical support and programmers to provide consistency in programming course materials. These students can come from any major in the university, not only the obvious ones such as computer science or engineering. The production lab, which was shown to members of the team, could be better utilized as a resource for faculty if this strategy is adopted.

Recommendations for Improvement

If NSU administrators desire to have a large percentage of faculty teaching online or at least to have the ability to teach online, greater course development support and faculty professional development are needed. The small ECE staff has done a great job helping faculty given the breadth of their responsibilities. It is essential to have training for Blackboard use or whatever course management system (CMS) is used in the institution. It is commendable that this training is made available to faculty. However, structured professional development in teaching online is needed if NSU administrators want more than early adopters and the most technically proficient faculty to be able to teach online.

1. ***Training in the use of the Blackboard Course Management System (CMS) should be mandatory, not simply made available, before faculty are given access to CMS accounts for their classes.*** The lack of a structured professional development program designed to prepare faculty for the pedagogical challenges of developing or converting courses, and teaching them online, is a limiting factor if having larger numbers of faculty ready and willing to teach online is desired by the administration. Support for students and faculty becomes much less of a problem if systems of support are planned and implemented around the instructional models taught in a faculty development program.

2. ***Scalable support strategies designed for larger numbers of faculty and students are more desirable than the difficult task of supporting any number of “one-of” courses. It is recommended that NSU move toward a stronger central support role through the office of Electronic and Continuing Education (ECE).*** “Master” course shells should be developed for those courses in which there are multiple sections taught so that each faculty member teaching a section of the same course is not creating their content from scratch. With limited resources, NSU should examine the possibility of making reusable learning objects available to faculty. The statewide partnership with MERLOT is an excellent resource to begin these discussions. NSU may also consider learning object repository software to reuse content developed by faculty in-house.
3. ***Principles of Course Redesign, as presented in the work of the Center for Academic Transformation (www.theNCAT.org), should be incorporated into curriculum planning for e-learning at NSU.*** This program cites numerous examples of institutions that have achieved significant cost savings and improved student learning outcomes by using strategies such as combining course sections and supporting students with alternate staffing patterns.
4. ***Training in online pedagogy should be an integral part of faculty professional development, not just training in the technical functions of Blackboard.*** Interactions between students and between students and faculty are important parts of online courses and programs. NSU responses to the SREB questions submitted before the site visit indicate that interactions are built into course design because “each course has a Blackboard shell with students able to participate in online discussion with other class members, present projects or papers to other students and to dialogue privately with the instructor.” The fact that each course has a Blackboard shell does not mean that each course has these types of interactions built into the course design. If these types of interactions are expected to be part of each online course, it is important to prepare faculty with not only the technical skills to operate Blackboard, but with the pedagogical knowledge to engage students in instructionally meaningful ways. This would be a key part of a required faculty development program.
5. ***NSU should consider whether there is student and faculty interest in “hybrid” courses.*** Hybrid courses are those in which some classroom instruction (i.e., required face-to-face meetings) is replaced with online interactions. NSU currently supports either fully online or traditional courses that are “web enhanced.” At many institutions, students and faculty have found hybrid courses to be appealing because they combine the flexibility of Internet instruction with the supportive classroom environment. This model can be especially effective in courses for which the online medium presents special challenges or where there is field experience required (e.g., speech, nursing, teacher education). There are administrative challenges with implementing hybrid courses (e.g., classroom scheduling). Therefore, if NSU determines there is a likely student market for this model, it is recommended to begin with a smaller scale experiment within a single program.

LIBRARY AND LEARNING RESOURCES

Overview

Academic libraries ideally provide complementary virtual and physical services and resources for students and faculty. Every effort is made to acquire journal, conference and other content in electronic format, even as print materials continue to be an important resource. Students, faculty and researchers experience our libraries as both physical and virtual spaces. Services necessarily have to evolve to bridge both audiences. Watson Library has the potential to benefit faculty and students engaged in e-learning at the same time it benefits the campus-based community.

Louisiana provides a fairly comprehensive suite of digital journal articles via the LOUIS consortium, of which Watson Library is a member. Access into these full-text databases is the same for both campus-based and off-campus students and faculty, driven by a standard authentication protocol. All academic libraries in the State of Louisiana are expected to make users aware of digital and print resources, minimize efforts to acquire needed information in all formats, and provide tools, instruction and assistance to meet user needs and expectations.

Opportunities exist for Watson Library to raise awareness of library resources and services, improve information fluency and research habits of students, connect more beneficially with the NSU academic community, and imbue both physical and virtual aspects of the library with provisions for learning. The library could become an influential member of the academic community by adopting a proactive model of service to address the learning and research requirements of students and faculty.

Each aspect of library services (both on-site and remote) must contribute to a logical, comprehensive and evolving library program to support learning. A learner-centric program will value and reward proactive service, smart marketing, critical partnerships with faculty and support units, deployment of best practices and metrics, learning aids and timely support.

Resources and Strengths to Build Upon

Information literacy/distance education coordinator has been hired; proactive outreach can accelerate information fluency training. Watson Library has recently hired an information literacy/distance education librarian to coordinate both the information skills' instruction program and remediation in student research. Library staff recognize that information fluency and good research skills are critical elements in student success. The instruction coordinator along with fellow reference staff provides hour-long classes in Watson Library in the use of citation and full-text databases, and in research skills. Students who attend typically do so at the behest of faculty. Library staff prefer that students come to Watson Library for training. For many students this is their first visit to the library.

The library's primary classroom is being renovated. Until the work is finished this summer, librarians will offer training in various electronic classrooms across campus. These dispersed teaching locations are perceived by librarians as less desirable than their in-house venue. But is this overlooking an opportunity to engage faculty and students on their turf? Co-location of

student instruction, training and engagement to both academic classrooms and the library may be most effective. Librarians have a place alongside faculty in their classrooms, facilitating the development of research skills. Ironically, many teaching faculty do not think to address undergraduate research skills. Faculty too seldom recommend primary databases, nor are they likely to give students insight into the logic and analysis required to effectively identify and evaluate needed information. Librarians should work with faculty to get time in their classrooms.

Each Watson librarian is assigned liaison areas for resource development, reference support and faculty engagement. Librarians should pursue opportunities to collaborate with faculty in research-intensive courses where students have the highest motivation to absorb and practice information fluencies. The team would like to see the emergence of best practices that define effective librarian outreach. At the suggestion of librarians, Blackboard courses might be enriched with links to primary databases, basic research tips, immediate information assistance and other library assets to help both virtual and campus-based students. A proactive service philosophy should be promoted, with librarians engaging faculty to embed information fluencies into the classroom experience. This shift toward proactive engagement will require a change in the current reference service philosophy.

Membership in a statewide consortium supplies an adequate amount of electronic full-text resources for students and faculty. The basic suite of full-text and citation databases is adequate for undergraduate learning. Databases are easily linked to from the library homepage, and use standard search interfaces that most students, on site and virtual, would find relatively easy to use. In instances where electronic full-text is not available, a basic search utility checks for ownership in the Watson Library catalog.

Free interlibrary loan service is provided for books and journal articles not owned by Watson Library. Watson Library provides free book and article delivery to distant students. This reduces anxiety, effort and expense to acquire needed information. A more persistent marketing of the service, especially via faculty who teach online and with reminders embedded in Blackboard courses, could drive up awareness and use.

Librarians and support staff are inspired to transform library spaces and services. Some librarians and support staff have practical ideas for transforming the library into a student-centric facility. While programming of these spaces is not formalized or guided by either a campus or library planning group, the team is optimistic about ideas described.

Key Challenges

NSU students are not well connected to their library. The majority of student visitors go directly to the “student exclusive” productivity lab on first floor, a facility that is almost completely divorced from the surrounding library. The productivity lab was funded by the university in concert with students, and without the involvement of library staff. Students appear to feel that library staff can not, or do not wish to, support this facility. Library staff rarely venture inside the lab. This is unfortunate because students are dealing with assignments, some of which involve identifying and acquiring information to complete their work. At the earliest

opportunity, library staff should begin a serious dialogue with students to integrate the student-exclusive lab into the surrounding landscape.

The reference floor of the library is no longer a critical destination for students. The reference floor is principally filled with underutilized print materials, and with a modest number of “bibliographic look up stations.” These once critical reference tools are in many ways anachronistic. Basic productivity software has not been installed on these stations. For some months, the library has held on to a stock of new computers that it would like to deploy onto the reference floor, enhanced with basic productivity software. One staff person imagines moving the unused print indexes and finding tools out of the way and creating a basic information commons in this area. There appears to be no resistance to the idea, but planning to date has existed for the most part in the mind of the one enterprising individual. In addition, no students or faculty have been engaged in the programming of the space to assure best implementation and use. A formal planning process should be initiated, presumably including campus IT personnel, student representatives, and perhaps NSU individuals responsible for tutoring/mentoring to develop an information commons to meet the contemporary needs of students, and begin to define practical partnerships with other units that might want a presence in the area. Skilled assistance with software applications should be provided.

Recommendations for Improvement

1. ***The library director vacancy should be filled as soon as possible.*** The library has endured an unfortunate set-back with the departure of the former director and the extended search for a replacement. The acting director is not empowered to develop with staff a comprehensive plan for moving the library forward. This malaise makes it difficult to develop and sustain initiatives to help the library become an essential player in student and faculty success. The damage to staff motivation might be more extensive were it not for the broadly-held perception that it is not easy to attract qualified individuals to NSU. The university should diligently recruit a director to re-establish the library as an effective partner in the academy, and advocate for virtual services and resources with the same conviction as for those on-site.
2. ***Library staff should connect with faculty in traditional and online courses to deliver course-integrated information, fluency instruction and assistance.*** Most faculty at colleges and universities do not seek the assistance of librarians when developing course content. Nor, ironically, do they consider developing the research skills of undergraduates. Librarians could approach faculty teaching online courses with offers to identify or provide complementary content, supplemental readings and information fluency skills. Primary and secondary information sources, especially subject specific databases, reference materials and seminal journals should be posted to students’ attention. Such a provision of information service is dynamic, collegial, and in tune with students’ learning habits.

3. ***NSU should aggressively and systematically develop both in-person and virtual services via the library.***

a. Develop a strategic plan to effectively address the information needs of on site and distant populations.

Watson Library does not have a strategic plan. There is no contemporary statement of what services should be, no vision of “where we go from here.” This essential work is on hold until a library director is hired. One might argue that such work should await the appointment of a permanent director who could provide vision and direct the planning exercise, but waiting seems less desirable than attempting to move ahead. There is much work to be done. The consequences of doing nothing in this long interim period have a detrimental effect on the emergence of needed services. The library would benefit from a serious attempt to develop such a strategic plan, perhaps assisted by facilitators from other areas of the university. Some creative library staff have good instincts and ideas about improving services, but there exists no official mandate to move forward.

b. Engage faculty and students in ongoing dialogue to inform services.

Library staff reveal good ideas for improving physical spaces, but they are being imagined in a vacuum. The NSU academic community is not “at the table” as these ideas take shape. Faculty, students and units supporting e-learning should be enjoined in a formal, systematic and persistent way to identify realistic improvements to services that can be initiated in both the short and long term. Watson Library remains relatively isolated from the NSU academic community. Some faculty would embrace the opportunity to work with the library on initiatives that would: a) embed information components in courses, b) facilitate the identification and use of information resources via Blackboard postings and linkages, and c) develop the basic research skills of undergraduates. Other possibilities exist, and they would more likely emerge in a collaborative, enjoining environment that the library could host.

Student and faculty advisory councils could provide a persistent mechanism to influence and inform the development of information fluency programs to benefit both campus-based and distant students. The library could begin to positively influence student and faculty perceptions of services (both for physical and virtual customers) by setting up combined or separate councils to help the library track customers’ needs. These advisory groups would be engaged for the long term, facilitated and sustained by perhaps no more than two library staff. Their work might initially be centered on building a strategy to improve library service to local and e-students, coupled with improved outreach to faculty.

4. ***Library services need to be marketed to e-learners more effectively.*** Services for e-learners are difficult to ascertain. The library homepage provides the remote user with very basic navigation information, but with no targeted news, “services for e-learners” or other information to interpret library services for the individual at a distance. Students habitually use Google to search for needed information. In order to attract them to the

Watson Library home page, it should be enhanced with announcements and content appealing to e-learners as well as to those on site. The library might meet with representatives of the NSU e-community (faculty, support staff and students) to determine where there is lack of awareness, where services might be improved, and to identify new approaches for improving student success “at a distance.”

Of particular value could be a comprehensive e-orientation, replete with instruction for doing basic research, identifying and evaluating content, and linking to the virtual writing center mentioned elsewhere. For its homepage, the team imagines the library producing student “testimonials” as both streaming video clips and narrative pieces that endorse valuable library services.

5. ***The library should partner with the Office of Electronic and Continuing Education and other logical units of the university.*** The library should not develop e-services in a vacuum. It currently does not have enough contact with ECE or other units supporting e-learning and e-learners. The library should create a group of advisors/partners who together could develop a strategic vision for positively impacting the e-community. There is much to explore. Faculty already engaged in e-learning have insights and lessons to share regarding potential collaboration and library initiatives. The team met several enterprising faculty who would be engaged.

The team sees particular value in library staff being consistently included in faculty training workshops that prepare faculty to teach online. Librarians could review the suite of resources and services that best complement each discipline. Moreover, attention could be given to the critical components of undergraduate student research.

6. ***Library staff should assist faculty with identification and provision of digital content.*** The state consortium of academic libraries experimented for a time with providing an electronic reserves utility for pushing digital content to the student desktop. For reasons that are unclear, the service was suspended. This is unfortunate, because faculty at NSU are inconsistently using Blackboard to push primary and supplemental readings to students. This inconsistency, seen wherever course management systems (CMS) are deployed is due in part to the labor involved to process and post the readings. Libraries across the country with robust electronic reserves services find that faculty often opt to use library scanning services (e-reserves) even as they develop other components of their courses on CMS. Faculty would rather use their time, and that of their teaching assistants, on more substantive work.
7. ***NSU should move forward with physical changes to the library with the greatest potential for positive impact.*** As the library contemplates renovating spaces for refreshment and student productivity, students should be invited to participate in the planning and policy development. This engagement by students will help the library to assure best outcomes for the intended audience. The team can imagine spaces evolving to support “enclaves” of student learners, organized in various ways: sorority and fraternity study areas, a freshman location and zones where tutoring is conducted with

math, writing, chemistry and other assistance, especially for courses that are notoriously difficult for students.

Watson Library is a pleasant facility with high ceilings, clean lines and reasonably attractive and comfortable furnishings. Working with students, the library could identify ways to make many of the study spaces student-centric. Performance events could be staged in the soon-to-be-built coffee house. Computer game tournaments might even be played in the imagined information commons during off hours. The possibilities for creating “student owned and identified” spaces are almost endless.

a. Transform the first floor reference space into an information commons.

Taking a cue from the student-exclusive lab in another area of first floor, library staff imagine reducing the reference print collection to enable the creation of a center for student productivity . . . an information commons. The idea is to install a substantial number of new, but not yet deployed, computers into this freed up space, loaded with productivity software, and adjacent to an “improved” information desk. One library staff person who appears to have thought the most about transforming the reference floor into a more dynamic, student centered facility suggests that the rather humdrum reference desk be remodeled and moved into the midst of the information common. This improvement has the potential to drive other changes that might eventually “heal the rift” with students who currently sequester in the student-exclusive lab.

b. Popularize the writing center and consider expanding to e-learners.

The library has recently provided a workstation to the campus program responsible for running a writing center. The center is staffed by a student assistant Tuesday through Thursday evenings who interacts with students in person. But what about the distant student? E-learners might be equally accommodated via a synchronous virtual space, perhaps developed by ECE, where they could engage in initial and early stage discussions about writing assignments, and could get a reader’s perspective on papers in draft form. Other universities are offering both on-site and virtual writing assistance. For the library’s part, it might encourage the sponsoring department to install the writing clinic in a more visible location in the information commons for heightened awareness. The current trend on campuses is for writing assistance to be easily found.

c. Install a coffee house/snack bar on an upper floor of the library in a spacious and potentially attractive area.

While modest in scope, the snack bar will attract students into the space who otherwise spend most or all of their time in the student-funded and student-exclusive productivity lab on first floor. This break area will address the need for social spaces in the building that facilitate interactions among students and others, as well as inspire and refresh. Funding is committed to install a coffee house and lightly refurbish the surrounding areas later in 2005.

- d. Create areas that recognize and celebrate student accomplishment and creativity.
The team imagines the first floor of the library, including the inner foyer, filled with commendable student projects, exemplary student research (think “poster session”) and prize winners (superb examples abound in the College of Business). Students want to be inspired by the success of others. And exhibits that demonstrate excellent research go directly to the mission of the library, to make information fluency a life asset of every student who graduates.
- e. Consideration should be given to turning over a significant proportion of study carrels to undergraduates.
A substantial number of study carrels in the library are for the exclusive use of faculty and graduate students, yet demand for carrels from faculty and graduate students appears to be low. Neither the carrels nor the six group study rooms have data drops. The library might work with campus IT to determine the expense of providing this connectivity, even with the imminent arrival of wireless access. Wireless access is presumed to happen later in 2005. It should be persistently available throughout the library.
- f. Provide productivity tools for just-in-time use. The library could gain prestige with students by making available laptops (with wireless access easily configured), digital still and movie cameras, white boards (perhaps a couple with Mimeo software for capturing content) and other useful tools for individual and group endeavors.

STUDENT SERVICES

Overview

NSU is moving toward making all student services available online—an admirable goal that will enable distant students to enroll and successfully complete courses and degree programs online. Through written correspondence and from the team site visit, the following services have been described as currently being provided online. Students may access most of these services via links from the ECE home page.

- *Recruitment:* NSU provides an electronic form for prospective and inquiring students to receive more information. If a student is interested in an online program, ECE sends a personalized detailed response via email, followed by a welcome postcard, and finally a personalized letter that provides admissions instructions and program information. While the above may be common for online and/or face-to-face programs at other universities, NSU takes the additional step of having a member of the ECE staff personally contact every NSU online applicant by telephone to provide assistance during enrollment periods. ECE staff also enroll graduate students in online programs. It should be noted that all these recruiting tasks are accomplished through the collaborative efforts of ECE and University Recruiting.

- *Admissions:* NSU provides online admission applications for undergraduate, transfer and graduate students. However, it is not clear how a student applies specifically for an online program. All degree programs are listed, but there does not appear to be any notation as to which are available online (SREB reviewers did not see an Associate Degree for Criminal Justice listed at all, for example). Reviewers also tried to click on the “Online Instructions,” for admission applications, but received a “page cannot be found” message.
- *Catalogs:* NSU catalogs are available as online PDF files. The graduate catalog describes eNSU as part of the General Information section and refers readers back to the ECE home page for more information. There are no other references to online programs in the catalog. The undergraduate catalog failed to load despite numerous attempts from several locations.
- *Fees and Fee Payments:* Students who enroll in only electronic courses and who do not attend courses on campus pay a separate set of fees from those paid by on-campus students. It is interesting and somewhat confusing that the electronic course tuition and fees are simply referred to as “fees” and it is not clear from the website how much of the amount is for tuition and how much is for fees. It might be better to spend some time reorganizing this page to make sure students do not think these “fees” are actually in addition to NSU tuition (for face-to-face courses). If NSU waives certain fees for distance learners, that should be highlighted. Students enrolled in only electronic courses do not pay out-of-state fees. All fees may be paid online.
- *Financial Aid:* The Financial Aid office appears to accommodate both on-campus and distance learners. Applications may be made online; however, the Financial Aid office is open only Monday-Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. These hours are probably satisfactory for e-learners for this service. E-learners may use their excess financial aid balances to purchase textbooks from the NSU bookstore and have them shipped to their homes.
- *Technical Support:* Providing technical support is a challenge at NSU. A general help desk, called SOS (Student Online Support) is available Monday-Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. This help desk is manned by students who are hired by the Student Technology department and who assist all NSU students with *all* computer-related needs, including Blackboard issues. If an online student has a Blackboard problem that cannot be handled by the SOS staff, the problem is turned over to the “university system administrator” (ECE staff) who will attempt to solve the problem for the student. If the ECE staff member is unable to resolve the issue, s/he contacts Blackboard technical support. Although SOS students are hired and “officially” supervised by Student Technology, day to day supervision is handled by ECE, which seems inefficient. NSU is financially unable to provide 24x7 technical support, which means that ECE staff are often found working nights and weekends in order to assist online students.
- *Bookstore:* NSU does have an online bookstore presence, but it is not user-friendly for the distance learner. Each time SREB reviewers tried to search for a textbook, the system asked, “do you want to save the file?” There is no information handy about shipping textbooks (or fees to ship). Although distance learner financial aid funds may be used to purchase textbooks, there is no information about this on the bookstore website, nor is there any

buyback information on the site. The actual link to the bookstore from the ECE home page was no longer active. This service is in need of a complete review and plan for improvement in order to be effective for the online learner.

It should be noted that there are several locations for “student services” within the NSU website. ECE provides a link to its student services, NSU provides links to Student Services as well as to Student Support Services, and within the online registration section of the site, a student can enter yet another set of student services. This is very confusing for a student.

Resources and Strengths to Build Upon

In addition to the positive services that are identified in the list above, the greatest strength of NSU ECE is the passion the staff hold for serving e-learners. By providing personal communications with students who have inquired about NSU online programs, the ECE staff demonstrates a commitment to the students as well as to the university. The personal phone call made to students once they have been admitted to an online program is an example of outstanding service. Another strength of the operation is that, although confusing in places, all admissions and registration can be handled online or via telephone. Again, ECE staff go beyond the call of duty by actually registering students for graduate level online courses.

NSU has chosen to waive Student Association fees, Student Insurance fees, and Health Services fees for students who are studying completely online. In addition, NSU does not charge out-of-state fees for these students. E-learners have long complained about paying fees that are not applicable. NSU has responded to these complaints and is now demonstrating a commitment to serve e-learners through the waiving of fees.

Recommendations for Improvement

NSU and the ECE have indicated a desire to increase the number of enrollments in online programs, and have expressed intent to serve those students with services that are equal to on-campus services. Many services are being offered; however, there are specific areas that would benefit from improvements. It is noted that budgets are very lean at NSU and staff may therefore be unable to increase some services. The team identified the following areas where improvements can be made, regardless of whether or not they are all possible at this time.

1. ***NSU should work to establish stronger connections between ECE student services and campus-based student services.*** Overall, there does not appear to be a great deal of coordination between the general student services offered by NSU and by ECE. While services are provided by the various “student services” units (as noted above there seem to be several), the ECE must provide additional services to e-learners on its own. Documentation indicates that all NSU business can be conducted online; however, student services are not limited to “business” only and careful consideration should be made to plan for non-business services for e-learners. For example, student services such as tutoring and counseling are provided to on-campus students only (or perhaps to distance students if they choose to travel to campus), but these services are not generally available to the online students. The campus student service units are working in an on-

campus world. If the institution is committed to increasing access to its constituency, and increasing enrollments through electronic delivery, there needs to be a stronger connection between ECE student services and NSU proper. A quick comparison of all NSU student services and those available for e-learners shows that coordination is lacking. The university should commit to the improvement of services for e-learners that includes additional staff as appropriate. E-learners today are very savvy about the services they expect, and if those services are not available, they have many other choices in online providers.

2. ***In collaboration with other student services personnel, ECE should explore and create scalable service models.*** As mentioned previously, the ECE has a passion for serving learners at a distance. Providing personal attention such as phone calls to new students is an outstanding service, but it will become difficult to scale (it may be already) as enrollments increase. This approach will eventually require additional staff or new streamlining techniques. It is important for NSU to recognize the success of the ECE staff in their efforts to bring new students to the university. Some level of budget sharing for student services and staffing needs to be established if the ECE is to continue this level of support.
3. ***The technical support operation and its reporting structure needs to be revisited and restructured.*** The team suggests that NSU and ECE re-evaluate the technical support operation. There is no real option for students at night or on weekends if a test freezes or if they are unable to access their courses. Yes, Darlene Williams and others try to make themselves available almost 24 hours a day, but that is not a reasonable solution. Short of establishing a 24x7 technical support help desk, other options include an answering service with student workers “on call” during shifts, or something like Rio Salado Community College’s “Beep-a-Tutor” program, where student workers wear a pager during their shifts and return calls for assistance as they come in. Either of these solutions (and there are others) would provide a more consistent level of technical support without the costs of a traditional 24x7 help desk. Another suggestion is to identify the two or three questions coming to the help desk that consume the most staff time, automate those, then redirect resources to other priorities.

Related to the current support available Monday through Friday, there does not appear to be a link to the SOS service within the various courses. Information about how to access technical support should be included throughout every online course offered. Finally, with regard to the reporting structure of the SOS help desk, it is recommended that NSU make a decision as to whether it is an ECE service or an NSU service. If it is an NSU service, then ECE should have some level of input, but the IT department should have management and budget authority. If it is an ECE service, then ECE should have a budget for the service and full oversight of the operation.

4. ***NSU should work to build student community through online interaction.*** The level of interaction in the online courses seems to vary considerably. ECE encourages interaction but they do not have a mechanism in place to enforce interaction as a critical strategy. To some, building interaction is not viewed as a student service. But research has shown

that interaction leads to building communities of online learners who are enrolled in the same online program. Student interaction has proven to be an effective means to ensure high course completion rates and student satisfaction. It is suggested that ECE research and apply interactive techniques that involve the students as well as the professors.

5. ***It is essential that all members of the NSU community take careful measures to ensure student privacy.*** During the site visit, the team was told that students received each other's e-mails so that they can communicate with each other. Care should be given to privacy issues in this regard. A safer way to provide students with access is through the Blackboard CMS, discussion forums and by using the email function within Blackboard. This way the students can communicate with each other, but each student controls whether or not they want the sender to have his/her direct email address. E-mailing within the course shell keeps the student's e-mail address private.

Summary

Overall, it appears that the NSU administration supports the development and expansion of e-learning through the ECE, but does not completely understand the necessity to provide a higher level (and in some cases different type) of student support. Expenditures for ECE are commingled with other areas in the university, which makes it difficult to determine how much funding is set aside for the ECE operation. Without a specific budget for ECE, it is unclear how ECE leadership can grow the programs effectively. As enrollments increase, services have to be clearly stated and easily available. Because there appears to be several locations for student services within the NSU website, coordination between ECE and all other student service providers on campus would lead to a more streamlined and efficient method of delivery.

EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT

Overview

College-wide evaluation and assessment is conducted by the NSU Office of Planning and Assessment. This office coordinates student course evaluations for all courses, including electronically delivered courses. The office also is responsible for the university strategic plan, the Continuous Improvement Plan and accreditation planning. Beyond these campus-wide efforts, individual departments or units can request help for data queries or surveys, and the Office of Planning and Assessment serves in a support capacity to those efforts. For the office of ECE, evaluation/assessment methods include regular student course evaluations and a spring 2004 student satisfaction survey. In addition, Student Information System (SIS) data have been analyzed to reflect trends in student enrollment, retention and demographics. There are no formal mechanisms for faculty feedback or long-term program planning/market analysis for distance education.

Resources and Strengths to Build Upon

The ECE staff published a 2003-2004 Annual Report for Electronic and Continuing Education, which includes extensive and helpful information regarding the courses, programs, enrollments and services offered through ECE. It also includes data on student demographics, such as age, gender, ethnicity and geographic location. In some cases, these data are establishing a baseline of information that will be used to compare subsequent years' outcomes and progress. For example, online student retention and completion data were collected for the first time in 2003-2004. In other cases, the data are needed to counter misguided assumptions about electronic learning. For example, there appears to be a perception among some NSU faculty and staff that "students are all taking online courses from their dorm." In fact, the data presented in the Annual Report show that the majority of students taking an online course live 36 miles or more from Natchitoches.

The process for administering the online student course evaluations appears to be working well, although the response rate is somewhat lower than for on-campus students. A "splash" page appears before the final exam, which requires students to choose whether to complete the evaluation "now," "later," or not to complete it. The instrument itself mirrors the on-campus survey, but includes five additional items related to the online delivery method. NSU should consider ways to increase the response rate for online course evaluations, such as providing incentives or making the choice of non-participation less obvious (i.e., only include the "now" or "later" option in the splash page).

The student satisfaction survey of spring 2004 provides an excellent starting point for identifying students' needs and building a "profile" of NSU's various online learning student markets. Although the response rate was low, the 2004 survey could be considered a pilot from which to improve both the instrument and process in the future.

Recommendations for Improvement

1. ***NSU, through the office of ECE, should develop a plan and implement an ongoing market needs assessment.*** NSU has responded to local workforce needs and student demand by developing electronic programs in high demand fields such as nursing and education. At the same time, the planning process for ECE occurs somewhat in isolation from the academic units (and in isolation of data on market needs). For example, as earlier mentioned under curriculum planning, online courses are typically initiated by an individual faculty member who approaches his/her department chair or dean. This leads to an "early adopter" faculty approach to online learning, but does not necessarily result in programs and services that meet the needs of students and employers. Moreover, the task of *marketing* e-learning is much more effective when done programmatically and directed toward job seekers and employers.

As the leader in distance learning for northern Louisiana, NSU should more aggressively be seeking input from employers in the region regarding current and future workforce needs. Working with business leaders and parish school leaders is included as a "unit

strategy” in the ECE Annual Report, but this strategy needs to be further delineated as a process for gathering intelligence on market needs and bringing that information back to the academic leadership at NSU. It appears that ECE has excellent relationships across the university’s academic units from which to build, yet those relationships require a system that more closely links ECE and academic program planning.

2. ***In cooperation with the Office of Planning and Assessment and faculty leadership, ECE should take the lead to improve the Online Student Course Evaluation instrument.*** ECE has created an online survey instrument for students to evaluate courses and the services offered by NSU. However, the instrument itself does not completely target the online environment. For example, the statement, “Feedback about student performance on course assignments was provided,” should have the words, “in a timely fashion,” added. There are no questions that address interaction between students and professors or among students themselves. Perhaps a review of other schools’ evaluation instruments would be useful. The Office of Planning and Assessment staff mentioned that they had tried to restructure the instrument and were told the Faculty Senate would handle it. No progress had been reported. Furthermore, it was not clear in the documentation provided or during the team visit how the survey responses are reviewed, how trends are identified, and how necessary changes are determined and implemented. It is likely a SACS evaluation team will target this area and request specifics about the process as well as the frequency of reviews.
3. ***ECE should develop and administer a student “Drop Survey” to determine the reasons why some students do not persist in online courses, and use this information to improve services.*** One issue that surfaced during the site visit is the possibility of a high dropout rate in some online classes. During one of the interview sessions, an administrator spoke of his online course enrolling 25 students with only three who completed the course. The administrator offered his opinion that “the wrong students were getting into the course.” Is the problem that students do not know they are registering for an online course? Or is it something else? Another administrator suggested that some students are enrolling in online courses to fulfill the load required to qualify for financial aid. These may be anecdotal observations, but it does appear from the retention data presented in the ECE Annual Report that the retention rate for online students is lower than for overall NSU students. Establishing a “Drop Survey” process to determine why a student drops a course can yield important data for program improvement. The survey can be administered by telephone or online, and there are model instruments from other institutions available. If there are trends in the student drop pattern, it may be symptomatic of other support or instructional problems that could be addressed and resolved (or at least explained).
4. ***Improvements in the student satisfaction and faculty needs surveys could yield useful information for planning purposes.*** As e-learning becomes more important to the fabric of the NSU campus, leaders will need a solid understanding of who the students are, why they are enrolling in electronic courses, and what their needs are. At the same time, NSU leaders need to understand how best to prepare faculty to meet those needs. The spring 2004 student satisfaction survey had a low response rate (approximately 100 out of

3,000). The survey should be conducted again with strategies for increasing the response rate (e.g., perhaps try a “splash” page or provide an incentive).

The “Faculty Training Needs Assessment” instrument provided in the ECE Annual Report could be restructured to reflect the faculty member’s interest in 1) productivity tools, 2) developing a “Web enhanced” course, 3) developing a “Hybrid” course, and 3) developing a fully online course. The items in the current instrument are focused on training in the technology itself. While this is important to faculty (according to their responses), it would also be important to assess faculty interest in pedagogy and learning to teach effectively in an online environment.

5. ***NSU should implement an Online Course Quality Assurance Process.*** A number of colleges and universities are implementing policies and procedures that help ensure the quality and consistency of online courses throughout the institution. Quality assurance (QA) procedures can provide a structure for measuring quality, incorporating feedback from student evaluations, and recognizing faculty who meet the quality standards. There are varying degrees of formality to these QA procedures, but most include at a minimum some type of “checklist” of essential instructional elements that should be present in any online course before it is offered. Other programs extend the QA process into faculty training, student services, and even tie the program to faculty compensation. In all cases, the QA program should be based in solid principals of instructional design and service. An example of an outstanding model is Colorado Community Colleges Online, which won a national award from WCET in 2004 for its QA program.

NSU Online Course Assessments (<http://nsula.edutools.info>)

Part of the SREB evaluation included outside reviews of selected NSU online courses. Four online courses were selected by NSU leaders to be evaluated by external reviewers. The courses were evaluated using a set of criteria developed through the Online Course Evaluation Project (OCEP) at the Monterey Institute for Technology in Education. This is a nationally recognized course evaluation process funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and housed at www.edutools.info, a project of the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET). Each of the four NSU courses was reviewed by a team comprised of an instructional design expert, a technical expert, and an academic (content) expert. The purpose of the course evaluations is to inform NSU leaders of how their online courses compare against national quality indicators, and how they can use the findings to improve their course development process.

The course reviews were generally positive, with reviewers of each course noting sound pedagogy, clear presentation, and an appropriate amount of interaction between student and content, and student and faculty built into the course design. At the same time, there were problems observed by reviewers within each of the four courses. One was missing some key instructional elements, such as clearly stated learning objectives. In another course, while the instructional elements were all present, the navigation was cumbersome and guidance for students difficult to follow. In all four courses, there was a heavy reliance on text for

instructional delivery. One reviewer observed that the online content largely duplicated what a textbook normally delivers and does not take advantage of the medium of the Internet. Most of the non-text (e.g., graphics, video, simulations) course features reside outside the course shell on other Internet sites. It should be noted that these observations are consistent with challenges faced by many institutions across the country, which can be addressed through faculty professional development, collection and re-use of digital assets, and an online QA process (addressed earlier).

OCEP Review Model Assumptions: There are a number of viable approaches to online course development. Models range from courses designed and developed independently by individual faculty, to a centralized team approach that combines the skills of academics, instructional designers, web programmers, art directors and information designers. The four NSU online courses evaluated as part of this project are representative of the majority of online courses in higher education in which the faculty member assumes the lead role in course design and development. This model emphasizes the instructional skills of the faculty member and reflects the training and instructional design support provided by the instructor's institution. The model emphasizes student-to-student and student-to-instructor communication through the use of a course management system and relies on an accompanying textbook to provide the bulk of the course content for the student to explore. In some cases, the publisher provides ancillary support the instructor can incorporate into the online course.

The four NSU courses submitted for review under the OCEP/EduTools program include: 1) Finite Mathematics; 2) Fundamentals of Business Enterprise; 3) Human Nutrition; and 4) Personal and Community Health. The complete reviews are available at <http://nsula.edutools.info>. Each course evaluation addresses a specific set of categories including 8 sections and over 50 topics. After the reviews were conducted by external reviewers, NSU faculty and staff were given an opportunity to correct any inaccuracies, and add additional information where needed. In addition, external reviewers provided a summary of each course, which is included in Appendix D.

A Concluding Statement

Northwestern State University has a long and proud heritage of service to the northern third of Louisiana, a history of academic quality, a central component and pillar of the Natchitoches community and a commitment to service. More recently, NSU has a growing record of success in the emerging e-learning “market” and has with limited resources, established a leadership role in e-learning in Louisiana. The team found a genuine love of the institution by the faculty and staff we spoke with during the visit and a real desire to see the university flourish in the coming years. Like many other institutions around the South, particularly those in more rural areas with a traditional focus on teacher education and training, the challenges of responding to the changing needs and interests of learners is all too real. As more young, and not so young, learners move away from more traditional majors and residential learning experiences, and seek more convenience, NSU has responded well. Despite limited resources, including human, technical and financial, the university has established an exemplary record in reaching out to the

changing student clientele, expanding activities at off-campus centers and pursuing e-learning initiatives. The record is a commendable one.

Despite this record of achievement, NSU is at a significant “crossroads” in its long history. Faced with enrollment challenges brought on in large part by changing admissions requirements, NSU must adjust its current path. It could proceed in any number of ways. The team believes the path to more fully utilize its emerging status in e-learning is one that should be given serious consideration. Indeed, the team believes that NSU should embrace e-learning and become THE university in the state of Louisiana system dedicated to serving adult and e-learners. We believe this can be accomplished, but it will require changes as outlined in this report, a commitment on the part of the broader NSU community to embrace the changes (what we labeled “cultural change” in the report), and the full support of the University of Louisiana System, the Board of Regents and the State. It will require new collaborations, a more open and friendly policy structure that is both accommodating and inviting to students around the state (and outside Louisiana) while maintaining NSU’s commitment to academic rigor and quality. These objectives, in our view, can be balanced and achieved. Further, the team believes that new collaborative and cooperative arrangements with other colleges and universities across the state can establish new pathways for students to find and be served by NSU.

The future is both challenging and bright for NSU. It has much to work with, in particular a community of professionals that are dedicated to providing quality education and service. It is a foundation to build upon.

Appendix A

Southern Regional Education Board Distance Learning Policy Laboratory Northwestern State University Assessment Team

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Appendix B

Questions For Northwestern State University To Consider In Advance Of SREB Evaluation Team Site Visit February 1-2, 2005

Administration/Governance and Finance/Facilities

Electronic and continuing education is taking on greater importance at NSU as it responds to the needs of a changing student clientele. Given the growth in enrollments and continuing pressure to provide more services:

1. Is there recognition and acceptance of the importance of electronic and continuing education in the current and long range plans of NSU? Is this commitment supported by (or will it be supported by): (a) growth in budgetary support; (b) additional staffing; (c) providing additional space and, in particular, technical infrastructure; (d) expanding support for online services needed by students; and (e) support for expanding programmatic offerings.
2. Is Electronic and Continuing Education a central part of academic planning and generally viewed as part of the “solution” to meeting students needs at NSU? Has NSU developed a formal, or informal, business plan and strategy for Electronic and Continuing Education that considers growth, support, demand, etc.?
3. How has the growth of NSU’s online efforts impacted the institution’s (a) service area; (b) off-campus mission; (c) role in Louisiana public higher education; and (d) plans for the immediate future?
4. Is the administrative structure of NSU adequate for carrying out the online mission? Is this structure appropriate for the long term viability of electronic and continuing education?
5. Have there been any formal, or informal, assessments made of the impact of electronic and continuing education on NSU, in particular its cost-effectiveness (i.e. is NSU getting an appropriate return on its investment?).
6. Has NSU entered into any partnerships, relationships or “outsourcing” with external providers of courses or services for online learners? If so, how have these worked? If not, is there consideration for such arrangements? In what areas?
7. NSU has, in the past several years, quietly achieved a significant record of growth and success in online learning in Louisiana. Is there (should there be) consideration by NSU leadership of becoming the “flagship” online learning institution in Louisiana including developing and expanding programs and services to help the state meet challenges in adult learning and continuing education? Should NSU become the “credit integrator” institution in the state? What resources would be needed?

Appendix B (Cont.)

Curriculum and Instruction

1. What process is used when NSU makes a decision to offer a program online? By what processes are online programs developed, and are academically qualified persons responsible for curricular decisions?
2. How are students notified of program requirements?
3. Are complete online programs realistically available to students for whom they are intended? For example, is the chosen technology likely to be accessible by the target student population? Can target students meet the parameters of program scheduling?
4. What provisions for instructor-student and student-student interaction are included in online course design? How is appropriate interaction assured? What technologies are used for course interaction (e.g., email, telephone office hours, phone conferences, voicemail, fax, chat rooms, Web-based discussions, computer conferences and threaded discussions, etc.)?
5. What support services are available to those responsible for preparing courses or programs to be offered electronically? What support services are available to those faculty members responsible for working directly with students? Are there opportunities for ongoing professional development? Do participating faculty members consider these services to be appropriate and adequate?
6. Does Electronic and Continuing Education staff include qualified instructional designers? If so, what is their role in program and course development?

Library and Learning Resources

Note: "DL" refers to distance learners.

1. Are there documents describing NSU Library's mission, goals and strategic thinking related to DL? What do Library staff perceive to be the most important challenges and opportunities as you shape services and resources for DL students?
2. What data do you have that characterizes Library / DL interaction (number and nature of questions handled, ILL statistics, etc.)? If data is not currently captured on DL interactions / transactions, what effort might be required to track this, and would it be perceived to be realistic or beneficial?
3. Does the Library model its DL services against similar university libraries?

Appendix B (Cont.)

4. How does the Librarian for Distance Education attempt to shape Library services for DL students and their faculty? How might this librarian's efforts be better facilitated by the university, and by the office coordinating DL program at NSU? Does this librarian handle all reference inquiries from DL students, or is the work shared among others?
5. Is there thinking, or work underway, to provide information literacy tutorials or other web-based learning objects to facilitate DL student efforts to identify, evaluate and acquire needed information?
6. Does Reference staff perceive that an instant messaging or chat service would benefit DL students, or do email and toll-free phone services suffice?
7. What assistance is provided when DL students have problems gaining access into databases and other remotely available resources provided by the Library (issues of personal authentication, URL resolution, etc.)?
8. Please describe consortial or other borrowing agreements with other Louisiana academic libraries (outside of ILL protocols) to benefit DL students?
9. From the "Library Services for Distance Education Students" web page, it appears that DL students might obtain *Copies of serials articles (magazine, newspaper, journal) from this department (Media Serials) . . . through (NSU Library) InterLibrary Loan services.*
 - Is there a cost associated with acquiring articles from the NSU Library collection in this way?
 - Is there a mechanism for DL students to remotely acquire *books* from the NSU Library collections?
 - Does the Library perceive that some DL students rely on ILL via their nearby public or academic library as a mechanism for remotely acquiring books and articles from NSU?
10. Regarding interlibrary loan, what consideration has been given to:
 - shipping requested books directly to DL students, rather than their coming to the Library to pick-up requested books?
 - relocating the pick-up and return point to a Library location with broader hours than ILL office hours?
11. Some full-text database licenses restrict access to NSU IP addresses (AIP, Iiter, EBSCO Electronic Journals Service). What possibility exists for setting up a proxy server to provide remote access for DL students? What are the implications (legal, costs) for database license agreements if remote access were provided to DL students?
12. Is the full-text of electronic reserves available to users from outside the Library, or must one visit the Library to read and harvest electronic postings? If access is not available outside the Library, has consideration been given to do so via a utility like Docutek?

Appendix B (Cont.)

13. Are there discussions / plans within the university system of Louisiana to acquire library services and / or resources that will have a positive impact on NSU's DL students?

Student Services

1. What are the specific services provided for students at a distance (from pre-admittance and registration through enrollment in program)? Do these services "mirror" the services provided to on-campus students?
2. Are there any special criteria for students to be admitted for fully DL programs?
3. How are students informed of the services?
4. Do DL students ever have to visit the campus to receive services?
5. When students assess the services and their responses indicate a problem, what are your strategies for addressing improvement areas (see pages 59-60 in the Annual Report)?
6. Is technical support outsourced or provided from within the institution? Is technical support provided 24x7? Please describe your help-desk operation.
7. How are students enrolled in ECE programs encouraged to build community among themselves and with the faculty?
8. Has the online feedback form been developed for distance students?
9. Do all DL students complete the services survey?
10. How much coordination takes place between the ECE and NSU proper? In other words, are the services provided by NSU for all students, or does the ECE provide some services themselves?
11. Does ECE have a voice in how NSU provides services?
12. How does the ECE protect student privacy?

Evaluation and Assessment

1. How does NSU review the effectiveness of your distance learning programs to assure alignment with institutional priorities and educational objectives?
2. How does Electronic and Continuing Education use results of student course evaluations from online courses?

Appendix B (Cont.)

3. In your annual report, there were off-campus student satisfaction surveys. Have student satisfaction surveys been developed or considered for online students?
4. How does Electronic and Continuing Education get feedback from faculty? Are there any faculty surveys, peer reviews of programs, or discussion groups?
5. How does Electronic and Continuing Education use retention/completion data (p. 25 of annual report) to improve programs?
6. Does NSU have in place policies and procedures to assure the integrity of student work?
7. Can NSU document evidence of expanding access to students who previously have not been served in traditional campus settings (e.g., through enrollment records or student surveys)?
8. What are NSU's mechanisms for identification of online program needs, program planning/development, program promotion (marketing) and program review/revision, and what constituencies are involved in this process?
9. Has Electronic and Continuing Education given consideration to implementing an online course quality assurance process?
10. Plans for the future are mentioned on page 50 of the Annual Report. What is the status of those plans?

Appendix C

SREB Consultation February 1-2, 2005 Agenda

Time	Topic
Day one	February 1, 2005 Natchitoches Room – Russell Hall
8:30 am	Introductions and Overview of Evaluation Process (Dr. Webb, Mrs. Williams, Mr. Abbiatti, Mr. Chaloux) (Mr. Jimmy Long, Dr. Scheffler, Dr. Seymour, Mr. Carl Jones, Dr. Moulton, Dr. Byrd, Dr. Worley, Dr. Granger, Dr. Hatley, Dr. Planchock, Dr. Temple, Dr. Gentry, Dr. Weaver, Mr. Brent, Dr. Colavito, Dr. Dickens, Dr. Hall, Dr. Horton, Dr. Lindsey, Dr. Pierson, Dr. Serio, Dr. Bodri, Ms. Triche, Dr. Withey, Dr. Stacy, Mrs. Lucky, Mr. Dowden, Dr. McCrory, Mr. Fleming Thomas, Ms. Ramirez, Mrs. Marsha Zulick, Dr. Monk, Dr. Rushing, Mrs. Belle, Mr. Barker, Dr. McBride, Mr. Morris, Mrs. Galleon, Dr. Tarver, Ms. Carwile, Dr. Heckaman)
9:15	Finance/Facilities (Dr. Scheffler/Mr. Carl Jones)
10:00 - 10:15	Break
10:15	Administration/Governance (Dr. Scheffler/Dr. Byrd/Mrs. Williams)
11:30	Lunch (Natchitoches Room)
1:00	Curriculum and Instruction (Deans: Dr. Hatley, Dr. Gentry, Dr. Worley, Dr. Planchock; Dept. Heads: Dr. Lindsey, Dr. Pierson, Dr. Serio, Dr. Dickens) (Faculty representatives: Dr. McBride, Mr. Morris, Mrs. Galleon, Dr. Tarver, Ms. Carwile, Dr. Heckaman)
2:00	Student Services (Dr. Seymour, Dr. McCrory, Dr. Stacy, Mrs. Lucky, Mrs. Adams, Mr. Dowden, Mrs. Belle, Mrs. Perritt, Mr. Sanson, Mrs. Williams)
3:00 - 3:15	Break
3:15	Library and Learning Resources (Mr. Fleming Thomas, Abby Landry)
4:00	Meeting of Assessment Team
5:00	Adjourn
7:00	Dinner

Appendix C (Cont.)

SREB Consultation February 1-2, 2005 Agenda

Time	Topic
Day two	February 2, 2005 Natchitoches Room – Russell Hall
9:00 am	Evaluation and Assessment (Mrs. Williams, Dr. Moulton, Ms. Ramirez)
10:00 – 10:15	Break
10:15	Individual Meetings (Room Assignments TBA) Bruce Chaloux to meet with Dr. Scheffler (Provost) Crit Stuart to meet with Fleming Thomas (Librarian) Darcy Hardy to meet with Dr. McCrory (IT) and Dr. Stacy (Enrollment Services) Steve Sorg to meet with Dr. Gentry (Dean of Education) (11:00) Bruce Chaloux to meet with Mrs. Williams, and Mr. Dowden regarding the Adult Learning Campaign
11:30 - 11:45	Break
12:00	Lunch and Exit Briefing (Natchitoches Room) (Dr. Webb, Dr. Scheffler, Dr. Byrd, Mrs. Darlene Williams, Dr. McCrory, Dr. Stacy, Mr. Fleming Thomas)

Appendix D

Course Evaluation Summaries

Finite Mathematics

The Northwestern State University (NSU) course titled Finite Mathematics (Math 1060) is one of four courses to undergo a thorough evaluation based on the criteria established by the Online Course Evaluation Project (OCEP). The course evaluations have been conducted by a team of three specialists: an academic subject matter expert, an instructional design evaluator and a technology evaluator. Each course evaluation addresses a specific set of categories including 8 sections and over 50 topics.

Highlights of the Finite Mathematics Evaluation

Finite Mathematics begins with a Welcome Letter from the instructor as well as a file, "How does this course work," which explains the major content areas of the course and where to find them. The course also includes a three-part Blackboard Orientation. Students must review the orientation and then complete assignments based on information contained in the orientation. These introductory materials are an excellent way to introduce students to the course and make sure students are comfortable with the course tools at the beginning of the course.

The instructional elements are organized by Lessons that contain the reading assignments, suggested homework exercises, and class activities that need to be completed. A Lesson Enhancement accompanies each lesson and contains summaries of key concepts, examples and online support materials for the weekly lessons.

The course utilizes a variety of assessment methods including quizzes and projects, a proctored online midterm exam, a proctored online final exam, and class discussion participation. The assignments are designed to determine a student's understanding of the materials and to establish a grade.

The course relies primarily on the Pearson Custom Publishing text, "A Survey of Mathematics with Applications," Angel and Porter, to present the course concepts, supported by "MyMathLab," an online course companion. The online content is largely textbook publisher assignments, with detailed instructions and activities provided by the course developer. Although style can always be argued, the excessive use of varied font sizes, bold type, colored type and underlining add to confusion rather than clarifying emphasis on specific content elements. The exercises, projects and activities are grouped together, outside the context of the course topics, which makes navigation cumbersome.

Finite Mathematics is a good example of an online course developed by an individual faculty member. The course provides students with comprehensive information about how the course materials are organized as well as a clear orientation to the CMS features needed to participate successfully in the course. The course includes discussion and group activities that facilitate

Appendix D (Cont.)

interaction with the content and foster student-to-student and student-to-instructor communication and collaboration.

Fundamentals of Business Enterprise

The Northwestern State University (NSU) course titled Fundamentals of Business Enterprise (BUAD 1040) is one of four courses to undergo a thorough evaluation based on the criteria established by the Online Course Evaluation Project (OCEP). The course evaluations have been conducted by a team of three specialists: an academic subject matter expert, an instructional design evaluator and a technology evaluator. Each course evaluation addresses a specific set of categories including 8 sections and over 50 topics.

Highlights of the Fundamentals of Business Enterprise Evaluation

The course relies primarily on the McGraw Hill text, "Understanding Business," 7th edition, Nickels et al., to present the course concepts, supported by a wealth of supplemental materials provided by the publisher. Each Chapter folder associated with the course includes links to News Feeds, PowerWeb Articles, Weekly Update Archive, Crossword, Internet Exercises, Critical Thinking, Casing the Web and Taking it to the Net. The amount of material accessible in the course is overwhelming and there is little direction for the student on what content to explore. One option would be to eliminate extraneous content not assigned, or deemed essential, by the instructor.

The exercises, projects and activities are grouped together, outside the context of the course topics, which makes navigation cumbersome. The video components (and some of the other McGraw content) reside on the publisher's servers and not the NSU Blackboard application, which requires another login process for the student.

The instructional elements are not organized and presented as outlined in the course syllabus, which may confuse students. For example, the syllabus states, "the presentation of BUAD 1040 utilizes four Modules...." The Assignment area content is organized within Modules. Additional folders are placed above the Chapter folders in the Course Documents area, but they are not divided into specific Chapters or Modules. The instructional elements in this course are difficult to follow, but can easily be improved if the materials were edited and organized, and included a description of how the content elements fit into the overall learning objectives of each module.

Fundamentals of Business Enterprise is a good example of online courses developed by individual faculty members utilizing existing textbook content converted for online use. With some improvements in organization, and the incorporation of exercises and activities that foster student-to-student and student-to-instructor communication, the course would become a more effective online introduction to business fundamentals.

Appendix D (Cont.)

Human Nutrition

The Northwestern State University (NSU) course titled Human Nutrition is (NUTR.1030) one of four courses to undergo a thorough evaluation based on the criteria established by the Online Course Evaluation Project (OCEP). The course evaluations have been conducted by a team of three specialists: an academic subject matter expert, an instructional design evaluator and a technology evaluator. Each course evaluation addresses a specific set of categories including 8 sections and over 50 topics.

Highlights of the Human Nutrition Evaluation

The instructional elements of Human Nutrition center around eight detailed assignments. Each assignment is posted with some background information, text readings, website suggestions and/or other potential resources. Students are required to search a variety of sources, including the text, websites, their pantry or grocery store, scientific journal articles to complete each assignment. Many questions involve research beyond the text or application of the information from the learner's own life. The course presentation is primarily text-driven and the inclusion of graphical elements would improve the overall design of the course.

The course relies primarily on the West Publishing text, "Understanding Nutrition," 9th edition, Eleanor N. Whitney and Sharon R. Rolfes, to present the course concepts, supported by a wealth of supplemental materials provided by the course developer. Communication with other students is encouraged. The assignments incorporate exercises and activities that foster student-to-student and student-to-instructor communication, one of the critical factors in creating a positive online experience according to a majority of online college students. The Background Information and Assignments pages are formatted in one wide column, making the text difficult for users to read on a computer screen.

Human Nutrition is a good example of an online course developed by an individual faculty member. The course promotes student-centered learning by requiring the students to play an active role in the learning process and by including assignments and activities that have real-world relevance. Including specific learning objectives for each course assignment would improve the overall effectiveness of this course.

Personal and Community Health

The Northwestern State University (NSU) course titled Personal & Community Health (HED 1090) is one of four courses to undergo a thorough evaluation based on the criteria established by the Online Course Evaluation Project (OCEP). The course evaluations have been conducted by a team of three specialists: an academic subject matter expert, an instructional design evaluator and a technology evaluator. Each course evaluation addresses a specific set of categories including 8 sections and over 50 topics.

Appendix D (Cont.)

Highlights of the Personal & Community Health Evaluation

Personal and Community Health begins with a Welcome and Expectations letter that provides students with detailed course guidelines and expectations for the course. The letter includes an orientation designed to introduce students to the features of Blackboard that they will use in this course. The instructor also provides excellent tips for using the discussion board including a grading rubric for the learning activity discussions.

The course is divided into Modules that are clearly organized by weeks, chapters and specific dates. Each Module contains Tasks, PowerPoint Slides, Learning Activities and Discussion Board activities. These materials are a mixed of original content developed by the course developer and by the textbook publisher. The learning and discussion board activities foster student-to-student and student-to-instructor communication, one of the critical factors in creating a positive online experience according to a majority of online college students.

Students are instructed to choose from among three different options as to which learning activity they complete for each module. The choice between learning activities allows the students to choose the option that fits their individual learning styles.

The course relies primarily on the McGraw Hill text, "Focus on Health," 7th edition, Hahn, D. B., Payne, W. A. & Mauer, E. B. (2005) to present the course concepts.

Personal and Community Health is a good example of a well-organized online course developed by an individual faculty member. The instructor provides tips for using the discussion board and includes a grading rubric for the learning activity discussions as well as a detailed rubric for the research paper. Critical student and instructor communication has been encouraged by the learning and discussion activities.