

Report and Recommendations of the Committee on Distance Education

WestConn is at a moment of opportunity in regard to distance education. Chancellor Carter has dissolved CSU Online in favor of returning management of online offerings to the campuses; demand for distance education options for individual courses, certificates, and degrees is on the rise nationally among both traditional and non-traditional students; some departments at WestConn are losing students to other institutions because the students are finding the courses they need online at other institutions, but not at WestConn. Expanded distance learning can help the university to meet current demand in a variety of areas, can help the university to better serve local, state, and regional communities, and can better serve the growing need for students to be technologically literate.

In a survey of sister institutions in the CSU system and of WestConn's peer institutions, the Committee has discovered that WestConn has established more of a distance education presence than some of those institutions, but that several have progressed far beyond our level of development and can be seen as models for distance education at WestConn. It would be prudent now for WestConn to establish new policies and procedures regarding distance education and to develop its distance and online offerings for the benefit of current and future students and as an avenue for possible collaboration with other universities where WestConn is currently cultivating relationships.

Types of Online and Distance Education

“Online” and “distance” are frequently used interchangeably, but they do, in fact, differ subtly. *Online* courses take place via computer instruction platforms (such as WebCT Vista at WestConn) that students and faculty log into remotely or on-site for synchronous or asynchronous class work. *Distance education* may refer to remote use of computer instruction platforms, but it may also refer to a variety of other practices such as videoconferencing (which is used at many rural branch campuses of state universities and community colleges) and correspondence (which is used in many low-residency Masters of Fine Arts programs in writing).

WestConn has a tradition of offering *hybrid* courses (which are also referred to as *mixed-mode* courses at some institutions)—courses that involve a combination of on-site class meetings and online work (usually asynchronously). When CSU Online was intact, these courses at WestConn were required to meet a 20% standard (at least 20% of the course took place on-site), which limited those courses to local students. WestConn has also developed a program, the MFA in Professional Writing, which takes the hybrid concept to the program level, combining short on-campus residency periods with distance study (a combination of online coursework and one-on-one correspondence, sometimes called the “packet” model). Such programs are known nationally as *low-residency* programs.

More and more frequently at both WestConn and at other institutions, faculty are using *online supplements* for their on-site courses—WebCT Vista discussion boards for discussion outside class, web pages with resource links, electronic reserves, images, video, and bibliographies, etc.

It would be to WestConn's advantage to establish policies on *online*, *distance*, and *hybrid* courses, certificate programs, and degree programs, especially in relation to the Strategic Plan.

Linkages: Distance Learning and WCSU Strategic Plan

Distance learning should be seen as an important element in several areas of the strategic plan:

3. Diverse University Community

3.1 ("Expand and enhance the diversity of our student body")

- Distance/online learning can be a tool to address learner diversity; can accommodate different learner needs, styles, and abilities and can accommodate learners who have access issues due to location or disability.
- Distance learning reaches out to non-traditional learners and provides flexibility of schedule to students juggling education, career, and family.

3.3 ("Enhance and promote academic programs that promote diversity in academic disciplines")

- Distance learning can forge connections among diverse learners and can be cultivated to form online learning communities to contribute to student success.
- Distance learning offers the opportunity to create certificate or degree programs that would appeal to students who wouldn't otherwise have access to WCSU.

3.4 ("Enhance and expand connections between students, faculty, and programs and the diverse community surrounding WCSU")

- Offering courses at a distance can establish relationships with members of the business community.
- Distance learning may provide opportunities for relationships with home communities of area immigrants.
- Distance learning opportunities encourage alumni to continue their educational endeavors at WCSU.
- Distance learning can expand professional development services to CT teachers

4. Range of Quality Academic Programs

4.1 ("Offering a range of programs that educates a diverse student population and meet the needs of the state and region")

- Distance education options can allow the University to expand on its range of academic programs by offering online certificate and degree programs for non-traditional students.
- The flexibility of distance education allows institutions like WestConn to initiate programs that can respond to needs in the local economy, form bonds with local businesses and organizations, and assist in other outreach efforts.

4.2 (“Identify the range of academic programs to be offered at the university)

- WestConn, like some of its peer institutions, is well positioned to offer varied certificates and degrees in high-demand fields such as teacher education, business, and nursing by distance.
- Distance Ed might facilitate the offering of more experiential, cooperative, internship experiences across academic programs.

4.6 (“Develop a process to define and articulate our signature programs for the purposes of branding and marketing, recruiting, and creating an identity for the university”)

- Distance Ed fits in with the description of signature programs, e.g., Information Security, Library Science, MFA in Professional Writing

5. Enriching and Supportive Student-focused Environment

5.1. (“Expand opportunities to strengthen partnerships between faculty and students in the academic arena in order to strengthen the collaborative nature of the educational experience provided by WestConn”)

- 5.1.C. Distance education can support the creation of permanent learning communities.
- 5.1.H. Distance education frequently uses technology as a means of facilitating communication between faculty and students. Distance ed can conceivably improve quality of advising, particularly by teaching faculty. Flexibility can work both in students favor and instructor’s favor. What advising hours work best for students? Faculty can more easily accommodate them if they can advise “anytime anywhere.”

5.2. Distance education has enormous potential for providing learning opportunities in a regional and global environment. Distance Ed experiences require technology competencies and in some cases, information literacy competencies. A student who can successfully take an online course is probably more ready for a technology-oriented workplace. Such a student becomes eady to be a lifelong learner, and is more capable of finding information on his/her own.

5.3.E. Distance education can enhance learning opportunities and provide flexibility to students who learn differently or have issues affecting their academic work.

5.6 Distance education enhances scheduling to optimize the academic experience by offering greater flexibility for faculty and students

6. Cost

- Distance education could contribute directly to affordability for many of our students, as it helps students juggle work and school. They can keep their “day jobs,” which in many cases provides the funding for their schooling, and complete their academic work on their own schedule. Many of our students would have to drop out of school if they couldn’t work at the same time. So distance education options can contribute to improving WestConn’s retention rate.

Practices at Peer Institutions

The committee has surveyed current distance education and online education practices at WestConn’s sister campuses in the CSU system and at ten institutions identified by President Schmotter as peer institutions. The peer institutions are:

- Clarion University (PA)
- Framingham State College (MA)
- Indiana University at South Bend (IN)
- Rutgers University at Camden (NJ)
- Shippensburg University (PA)
- SUNY-Fredonia (NY)
- SUNY-Plattsburgh (NY)
- University of Michigan at Flint (MI)
- University of Wisconsin at River Falls (WI)
- Worcester State College (MA)

The chart in Appendix A details a variety of distance education practices at the peer institutions. The committee has reviewed practices and interviewed distance learning officers at those institutions to identify a set of hallmarks for successful online/distance education at peer/sister institutions.

Hallmarks of Success in Online/Distance Education

Based on the information in the chart in Appendix A, the committee has identified five strong hallmarks of success among model peers (Clarion, Flint, and Plattsburgh) and among sister campuses. Model practices in those areas are:

- I. Dedicated instructional technologists¹, instructional designers², and support staff**
 - a. Clarion: 1 full-time instructional technologist
 - b. Flint: 3 full-time instructional designers; one full-time faculty liaison; instructional technologists; two faculty labs; full-time, 24-hour help desk
 - c. Plattsburgh: Instructional Technology Resource Center serves as an exploration and development lab for faculty, staff, and professional employees. Full-time Software Instructor/System Administrator, Full-time Instructional Technology Coordinator, Full-time Instructional Technology Specialist
- II. Incentives for faculty to adapt courses**
 - a. Clarion: \$2000 course-preparation stipend for first time course is offered and another \$2000 when course is taught after four years. Faculty receive \$500 stipend for the first 10 students and \$40 for each additional student over 10. Faculty receive a new laptop when they teach their first completely online course.
 - b. ECSU: Continuing Education offers selected faculty the equivalent pay for a 3-credit course to develop online courses.
 - c. Flint: Stipend of \$650 per credit (tied to commitment to offer course regularly—stipend not paid for one-time offering)
 - d. Plattsburgh: Faculty grants for software, workshops, and equipment/software upgrades; stipend for converting a SUNY Learning Network (system platform) course to ANGEL (campus platform)
- III. Orientation and ongoing instructional training for faculty**
 - a. Clarion: Faculty are strongly encouraged to take training from Learning and Technology Center. Faculty also have access to peer trainers.
 - b. Flint: Faculty teaching online are required to take training session in the online platform and an Intro to Online Teaching seminar (a self-paced training process online). An “boot camp” for online instructors is offered every year, as is one-on-one mentoring for instructors.
 - c. Plattsburgh: Instructional Technology Workshops offered at Center for Teaching Effectiveness. Faculty-led, 3-day intensive workshops are offered each term, and weekly mini-course training sessions are offered.

¹ Instructional technologists assist students and faculty with hardware and software access, training, and use.

² Instructional designers assist faculty with coordinating technology with curriculum and learning objectives.

- IV. **Extensive online help for students**
 - a. Clarion: Blackboard 101 course at Learning Technology Center; online tutorial course.
 - b. Flint: Orientation sessions on campus and online via audio files and interactive learning modules. Full-time, 24-hour help desk.
- V. **Strong online presence (distance learning web page easily accessible from main university web page, pages easily and intuitively navigable, course and degree information readily available, online help accessible)**
 - a. Clarion: Yes
 - b. Flint: Yes

Distance/Online Offerings at Peer and Sister Institutions

The following chart shows course, certificate, and degree offerings at the peer and sister institutions. “Third-party” courses and certificates are marketed by the host institution, but the content (sometimes self-paced) and instructor (where appropriate) are provided by an external company such as McGraw Hill, ed2Go, Gatlin, or Peterson’s. Third-party providers offer a wide array of certificates and courses, especially in Information Technology.

Distance/Online Offerings at Peer and Sister Institutions

| | Online Degrees | Hybrid Degrees | Online Certificates (Proprietary) | Online Certificates (3 rd Party) | Hybrid Certificates | Fully Online Courses Within Traditional Programs | Hybrid Courses Within Traditional Programs | Other 3 rd Party Courses (Credit and Non-credit) |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------|---|---|---------------------|--|--|---|
| Clarion | MBA, MLS, MSRS, MSN, BSN | | IT, Assoc. degrees in A&S and Early Childhood Ed. | Yes | | Yes | | |
| ECSU | | BGS | | | | | | |
| Flint | BBA, RN to BSN, MPA | MBA, MAEd | AS, OI | Yes | AS, OI | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Framingham | MECI, BALS | BALS | IT, Nutrition Ed., PDT | | | Yes | | |
| South Bend | | | | Yes | | | | Yes |
| Rutgers-Camden | | | | Yes | | Yes | | Yes |
| Shippensburg | | | | | | Yes | Yes | |
| SUNY-Fredonia | | | | Yes | | | | Yes |
| SUNY-Plattsburgh | RN to BSN | | | | | Yes | | Yes |
| Wisconsin-River Falls | | | | | | | | |
| Worcester | | | | | | | Yes | Yes |

AS: Africana Studies for Teachers BALS: Bachelor of Liberal Studies BBA: Bachelor of Business Administration BGS: Bachelor of General Studies
 BSN: Bachelor of Science, Nursing MECI: Master of Education, Curriculum and Instr. Tech. MLS: Master of Lib. Sciences MPA: Master of Public Administration
 MSRS: Master of Science in Rehabilitative Services OI: Online Instruction PDT: Professional Development for Teachers

Practices at WestConn

WestConn's current practices in the hallmark areas are:

- I. Dedicated instructional technologists, instructional designers, and support staff**
 - a. Part-time only
- II. Incentives for faculty to adapt courses**
 - a. Eligible to apply for one-time faculty work load credit for course development equivalent to the number of course hours
- III. Orientation and ongoing instructional training for faculty**
 - a. Training sessions in WebCT Vista available from University Computing
- IV. Extensive online help for students**
 - a. N/A
- V. Strong online presence (distance learning web page easily accessible from main university web page, pages easily and intuitively navigable, course and degree information readily available, online help accessible)**
 - a. N/A

Recommendations

Based on the goals of the strategic plan, general trends in distance education, hallmarks and activity at peer institutions, the Committee recommends that WestConn immediately begin to establish policies and procedures to promote responsible, high-quality online and distance education opportunities for current and future students.

Specifically, we recommend that the university:

1. Establish an independent office or Center for Online and Distance Education, perhaps under the direction of the Provost, for assisting departments with the establishment, coordination, and maintenance of online/distance study, for training faculty in online instruction and technology, for providing 24-hour online and live help to students and faculty, and for publicizing the university's online/distance offerings via the web page and other methods. The Center should employ at least one full-time Instructional Designer, at least one full-time Instructional Technologist, and support staff.
2. Encourage faculty to develop and maintain online courses by making the current FWL credit/stipend for online course development automatic.

Additionally, since workload in an online course is typically heavier than in an on-site course, we recommend that the university compensate faculty for large enrollments in online courses, paying an additional \$1000 for online courses with more than 15 students.

3. As a way of promoting technology literacy, establish a General Education requirement that each student take at least one online or hybrid course.
4. Encourage departments to create online certificate or degree programs that address local and regional needs by offering one new Assistant Professorship (whose duties will lie at least ½ with the newly created program) in the department for each new certificate or degree program created. In order to create innovative online (or mixed-mode) programs, departments must be able to add new faculty with demonstrated ability, training, or desire to participate in distance education. Without the incentive of additional faculty to cover the additional workload of the program, departments are unlikely to invest in the work needed to create new programs.
5. Commit to keeping online class size limits at the current limits for on-site courses.
6. Offer continuing education and professional development courses online. Consider using a 3rd-party provider for some certificate programs not offered at WestConn (such as IT certificates) as a service to the community.

The committee recognizes that some of these recommendations may require contractual negotiation.

Appendix A

| Distance Education Practices at Peer Institutions | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|-------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| | Clarion University | Rutgers- Camden | SUNY- Fredonia | SUNY- Plattsburgh | Michigan- Flint | Indiana- South Bend | Framingham State College | Worcester State College | Wisconsin- River Falls | Shippensburg University |
| Extensive information and resources readily available and clearly presented online | y | n | n | y | y/n/y | n | y | y/n | y | n |
| Online support | y | n | n | y | y | n | y | y* | y | n |
| Instructional technologist(s) | y | n | n | y | y | n | y | ? | ? | n |
| Instructional design specialist(s) | y | n | n | n | y | n | n | ? | n | n |
| Wide variety of courses online | y | y | y* | y | y | n | y | y and y* | n | few |
| Hybrid courses | ? | n | n | ? | y | ? | ? | y | n | y |
| Fully online degree programs | y | n | n | y (option) | y | n | y | n | n | n |
| Fully online certificate programs | y | y* | ? | y* | y (option) and y* | n | y | n | y | n |
| Hybrid programs (programs designed to have both | y | n | n | n | y | n | n | n | n | n |

| Distance Education Practices at Peer Institutions | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|-------------------------|----------------|---------------|------------------|----------------|--------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| | Clarion University | Rutgers-Camden | SUNY-Fredonia | SUNY-Plattsburgh | Michigan-Flint | Indiana-South Bend | Framingham State College | Worcester State College | Wisconsin-River Falls | Shippensburg University |
| campus and online components) | | | | | | | | | | |
| Clearly defined concept of online/distance education | y | n | n | y | y | n | y | y | y | y |
| Tools training for faculty | y | n | n | ? | y | n | y | y | y | y |
| Course development./ management training for faculty | y | n | n | n | y | n | n | n | n | n |
| Method | Blackbd, e-ptfolio, ITV | * | ? | ANGEL, SUNYLN | Blckbd., ITV | Propr., ITV | Blckbd. | Blackbd. | Desire2 Learn | Blackbd. |
| Course management system integrated with course content system | ? | n | n | y | ? | y | n | ? | n | ? |
| Best practices database | n | n | n | n | n | n | n | y | n | y |
| Online tutorials | n | n | n | n | y | n | n | y | n | y |

*Not managed by the institution—outsourced to Gatlin, ed2Go, Peterson’s, etc.