# Report of the Online Learning Task Force - Spring 2014

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Introduction

The Online Task Force was created in support of the “Online Learning” project in University’s strategic plan, Roadmap to Premier 2013. Online learning was identified in that plan as an important vehicle to help the University strengthen undergraduate and graduate education; the Center for Learning and Teaching (CLT) has been expanded; given additional resources to support faculty innovation in teaching, including online teaching; and tasked with developing a strategy for online education. The Online Task Force was formed to review the state of online education at Binghamton and assist the CLT in developing a strategic plan for distance learning.

The Task Force’s charge was to:

- Review current distance education programs, policies and practices at Binghamton University, as well as the infrastructure used to support them (hardware/software/network/technical and academic student support).
- Evaluate established and developing distance learning trends in higher education (e.g., MOOCs).
- Identify best practices for online/distance learning.
- Assess the strengths and weaknesses of distance education at Binghamton University.

For the purposes of this report, the Task Force defined online learning and hybrid courses as follows:

- Online learning is a model of course design in which the learning and teaching is created and delivered solely through the Internet, traditionally through a vendor-created or “homegrown” learning management system (e.g. Blackboard, Instructure Canvas, Desire to Learn, Google Class).
- “Hybrid” learning, which is synonymous with “blended” learning, is a model of course design that promotes the beneficial attributes of both in-class and online pedagogical concepts and techniques. One approach to this model would be a 50/50 structure in which a traditional Tuesday/Thursday class would have 50 percent of its learning and teaching online and the other 50 percent in-class. In creating the learning for this example, 50 percent of the course design would take advantage of in-class pedagogies while the other 50 percent of the course design would focus on online pedagogies. One hundred percent of “hybrid” course design should focus on the relationship between the learning that can happen between both the in-class and online design.

Following an organizational meeting in December 2013, the Task Force met throughout the Spring 2014 semester. Task Force discussions were guided by the following principles:

- Our guiding principles are academic rigor and responsibility in all of our teaching; online approaches are no different.
- Administratively, online course development and oversight need to be within the regular governance structures.
- We recognize the value of centralized coordination and collaboration as well as individual curricular innovation. The CLT should become the University’s central resource for the development of our online learning initiatives.
- Curriculum and oversight committees need to be knowledgeable about best practices in online course development within the relevant discipline(s).
- The University needs to encourage innovative thinking and rigorous assessment in online course/program development.
• The University’s strongly residential identity is not in question, but this should not discourage us from innovation in online learning.
• The University needs to appoint an advisory group for online learning to ensure that our approach continues to be forward-thinking.
• As should be the case with high quality face-to-face instruction, all online courses should articulate and measure desired student learning outcomes.

**National Trends and Context**

Online education is here to stay, and surveys that capture the sentiments of academic leaders point to its growth. Increasing number of educational institutions now see online learning as a critical component of their strategy. According to the Babson Survey Research Group’s 11th annual report on the state of online learning in US higher education, 66 percent of educational institutions currently consider online learning to be critical to their long-term strategy, compared to less than half in 2002. The current figure dropped from 70 percent in the previous year; this drop is accounted for by institutions that do not have any online offerings. It appears that institutions that don’t offer any online courses are assuming an even harder stance against online learning. The same survey reported that the number of additional students taking at least one online course has grown at a faster rate than the increase in enrollments. In 2013, the online enrollment growth rate was 6.1 percent (the lowest in a decade), which represented 411,000 additional students taking online courses. Currently, there are 7.1 million students who have taken at least one online course, representing 33.5 percent of the total student population. The general belief among academic leaders is that the number of students taking online courses will grow, with the majority of higher education students taking at least one online course in five years’ time. An online course is defined as one in which at least 80 percent of the course content is delivered online.

Despite the press coverage regarding MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), according to Babson Survey Research Group’s latest survey, only five percent of higher education institutions have implemented MOOCs, and that has been on an experimental basis. A MOOC has been defined as a course of study made available without any college credit or fee to a large number of students not registered at the university offering the course. While one-third of institutions have no plans to offer MOOCs, 53 percent are still undecided about MOOCs. However, an increasing proportion of academic leaders (63 percent in 2013 versus 55 percent in 2012) are concerned that certifications provided for completing MOOCs will cause confusion about higher education degrees. Though a limited number of higher education institutions offer MOOCs, the number of courses offered in this way, coupled with the very large number of students who take them, indicates their increasing significance in the educational landscape. According to Class Central, a site that aggregates MOOC offerings, 128 MOOCs are starting in April 2014 alone. Udacity and Coursera, two of the popular MOOC platforms, have decided to stop offering free certificates of completion. This is largely in response to concerns about identity verification of those taking these courses. A nominal fee will be charged to those who seek identity-verified certification. It appears that institutions that have implemented MOOCs are doing so not to develop a new source of revenue but for other purposes. Cornell University, for instance, sees MOOCs as a tool for public relations and enhancing community outreach. At Yale, recording classes for online delivery is seen as a way to immortalize teaching. Additionally, once videos are prepared for MOOCs, they can be assigned as homework to students in traditional courses to improve the classroom experience. Although MOOCs were meant to offer college education to more people for less, they are emerging as a tool mainly for the elite. Penn State surveyed students taking MOOCs offered by the university and found
that instead of reaching those who could not afford or access quality college education, MOOCs were being taken by those who already have some level of higher education (80 percent of students had a 2- or 4-year degree and 44 percent had some graduate education) and are reasonably well off (80 percent of the students came from the wealthiest and most well-educated sector of the countries represented by the students).

According to the New Media Consortium’s (NMC) 2014 Horizon Report (http://www.nmc.org/pdf/2014-nmc-horizon-report-he-EN.pdf), "Education paradigms are shifting to include more online learning, blended and hybrid learning, and collaborative models. Students already spend much of their free time on the Internet, learning and exchanging new information. Institutions that embrace face-to-face, online, and hybrid learning models have the potential to leverage the online skills learners have already developed independent of academia. Online [and hybrid] learning environments can offer different affordances than physical campuses, including opportunities for increased collaboration while equipping students with stronger digital skills.” In addition, the 2013 “Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning” report (http://kpk12.com/cms/wp-content/uploads/EEG_KP2013-lr.pdf), an annual review of State-Level Policy and Practice in K-12 schools (equivalent to the NMC’s higher-education focused “Horizon Report”), indicated that “as customers, schools [K-12] are aiming for a wide range of virtual, blended, part-time, full-time, and mobile offerings. Multiply this by thousands of districts, private schools, education agencies, and all 50 states, and the source of the proliferation becomes clear.”

Hybrid/blended learning environments continue to grow, and with the rise of experiments in MOOCs, both in higher education and K-12, there is much speculation about how the MOOC can be used in these learning environments. A 2013 article in the Educause Review Online (“Rethinking Online Community in MOOCs Used for Blended Learning,” http://www.educause.edu/ero/article/rethinking-online-community-moocs-used-blended-learning) suggests that “if MOOCs for blended learning are to fully realize the potential of online communities, we must investigate alternative forms of community that are more loosely coupled to content sequence and more distributed in terms of power.” Hybrid/blended learning environments are also trending through recent “flipped classroom” course design initiatives and will continue to grow roots into the foundation of education.

**Local Context**

A survey was developed and sent out by the Data Analysis subcommittee to gather information about current practices and concerns across the University. The subcommittee’s report, with detailed survey results, can be found in Appendix B. Survey results were returned from the College of Community and Public Affairs, the Decker School of Nursing, the Graduate School, the School of Management, the Watson School, Educational Communications, and the Libraries, as well as 17 departments in Harpur College. Of the units responding, 75 percent offer some online courses, 63 percent offer hybrid courses, and only four percent have a fully online degree plan or plan to pursue one.

Based on faculty responses to a survey, the subcommittee identified the following common issues and concerns:

- **The impact of online teaching on many aspects of the campus.**
  - Campus IT systems must be capable of supporting online instruction in terms of appropriate bandwidth and connectivity.
  - Campus Libraries will need to provide adequate access to materials remotely
  - Off-site students may have different needs than on-site students.
  - What are the costs of e-books versus traditional materials?
  - What is the impact on physical infrastructure?
• What is the impact on laboratories, research spaces, and office spaces?
• Financial implication and cost benefit analysis of implementation versus risk of not investing needs to be considered

• Concerns regarding course content quality and adequate instructor preparation.
  • Online courses are largely offered in Winter and Summer Sessions and are primarily taught by graduate students, who are often new instructors.
  • Regardless of who teaches courses, training and support is needed to maintain the high quality of programs.
  • Assistance with instructional design is required.

• Financial trade-offs.
  • Face-to-face courses during Summer and Winter often have low enrollment and attendance.
  • Is financial aid available for Winter and Summer Sessions?

• Ensuring security, authentication, academic honesty, and intellectual property.
  • Some courses may require “in class” testing or test proxies at remote locations.
  • Student may be inappropriately distributing teaching materials.

• Disparate use of tools.
  • Over 15 tools were mentioned in survey responses, including Blackboard, echo 360, Facetime, IChat, Skype, BB shockwave, Turn-it-in.com, Audacity, Camtasia, Proctor.
  • We need to establishing a technology roadmap that provides a common tool set to enable economies of scale in licenses, training, etc., while providing the tools that instructors want and staying flexible and responsive as technology is rapidly changing.

Recommendations – Pedagogy

Recognizing that not all courses are adaptable for online teaching, instructors who are considering teaching an online course, whether a new course or an adaptation of an existing course, should consult with the CLT’s instructional designers in the early stages of planning the course. Some of the questions that instructors should work through with instructional designers are found in the Pedagogy Subcommittee report in Appendix B. As technology and research continue to develop the field of online teaching, these questions will, by necessity, change.

Recommendations – Policies

• School/college policies: We recognize that, in a number of the following areas, the level of policy development may vary widely across academic units. Some of the following recommendations are the University level; some are at the level of school/colleges or individual units. Each school/college should review its policies in light of the following recommendations and develop policies if they are not already in place. To facilitate conversations between academic units, as well as compliance with accrediting bodies, a central record of policy development across the University should be developed. The CLT, on behalf of the Provost Office, will develop the central repository for all policies related to online education.
  • As academic units develop relevant policies, they should forward final versions to the CLT for inclusion in this repository.

• Course development, approval and designation: In keeping with its identity as a residential university, the vast majority of courses currently taught at Binghamton University in the Fall and Spring semesters are taught in a traditional face-to-face format; in the Winter and Summer, a
greater proportion of courses are taught online. This means that we need to develop an awareness of best practices and standards for online course development, and we need to think strategically about situations when the use of fully online courses may be advisable during the Fall and Spring semesters.

- We recommend that the CLT provide all colleges’ regular curriculum review structures with guidance for reviewing online courses. This will include information about best practices and about sources for additional information concerning legal and policy requirements.
- We recommend that all fully online courses or course sections be designated with the “DI” indicator in Banner and that an indicator be developed for hybrid courses.
- We recommend that every academic unit develop school/college-level curriculum approval procedures for allowing fully online courses to be taught during the regular semester.

**Instructor training and compensation:** Given the complexity of designing effective online courses, and to make sure they are comparable in depth and breadth to traditional face-to-face courses, it is appropriate to provide training in this kind of instruction. Because the time and effort required to adopt curricula for online delivery is substantial, it needs to be tangibly supported by the University.

- We recommend that the CLT develop and implement the University-wide training program for all instructors of online courses or sections, with an appropriate incentive for participation. These incentives should not be merely symbolic, but substantive.
- We recommend that the training opportunities extend to experienced instructors to facilitate continuing awareness of new technology and pedagogy. These will be based on best practices in the various disciplines.
- We recommend that the University review best practices for instructor compensation and adjust current faculty stipends as appropriate.

**Branding, course guidance and online success:** Current research indicates that online success is strengthened when students are able to navigate a course with ease.

- We recommend that a Binghamton course shell/template be implemented for all online courses. This template will be developed by CLT to incorporate best practices in online learning and will become the “base template” for all Binghamton online courses. In addition to featuring standard setup and design for the course site, it should include a link to a general overview/orientation (prepared and updated by CLT instructional designers) on the supported technologies, software and hardware requirements, etc. Individual course syllabi should reference this orientation.
- All faculty using supplemental/alternative software/technologies will provide their students with a necessary orientation to these technologies.
- A student resource should be developed for online courses, including a “Student’s Bill of Rights,” giving students a clear idea not only of the things that are expected of them (e.g., standards for “cyber-deportment”), but of the institution’s commitments in setting up this course, including contact information for instructors and departments, standards for faculty availability, etc. The handbook will include information about what it will take to succeed, available resources, information about technology, etc., and how this relates to the Student Code of Conduct.

**Academic honesty:** Online courses, whether fully online or hybrid courses, are subject to the same identity verification and academic honesty policies that pertain to traditional face-to-face courses, but the special issues that apply to online courses are not always addressed by policies that have been established for the traditional academic setting. In order to comply with
accreditation requirements and in order to provide clear direction for faculty and students, these policies should be examined and amended as necessary.

- We recommend that the CLT facilitate the establishment of University-wide policies to ensure that Binghamton’s identity verification and test-proctoring for online courses conform to the requirements established by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, the accrediting agency for Binghamton University.
- We recommend that all schools explicitly integrate on-line courses into their established academic honesty procedures. Issues to consider include remote access to hearings and procedures and the time frame for actions if courses are being delivered in the Winter or Summer Sessions.

**Accessibility:** Online courses are subject to the reasonable accommodation guidelines of the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act.

- We recommend that the CLT identify and share ADA-compliant course-building principles and that these be expected for creation of online courses.
- We recommend that a central contact/support be identified to help with course-specific needs as they are identified.

**Intellectual property:** SUNY’s statement about intellectual property rights for faculty members could reasonably be construed as applying to Binghamton University, but few instructors know what this policy is or where to find it. Explicitly adopting the SUNY policy and educating instructors about its implications will provide Binghamton’s faculty with important information about their rights and responsibilities.

- We recommend that Binghamton University officially adopt the current SUNY policy on intellectual property (if it has not already done so). The following is an excerpt from the policy: “With respect to faculty materials used on the web for instruction, under the current SUNY policy, copyright ownership is treated no differently than faculty materials produced for the classroom. That is, faculty own the copyright under the academic work-for-hire exception embedded in SUNY’s copyright policy. Alternatively, SUNY and faculty may enter into work-for-hire written agreements relating to materials produced for on-line use in which the parties may agree to vest copyright in either SUNY or the faculty and to provide for related licenses.” This is excerpted from a series of SUNY Trustee documents and legal interpretations available on the SUNY web site: [http://system.suny.edu/academic-affairs/faculty/faculty-ownership/](http://system.suny.edu/academic-affairs/faculty/faculty-ownership/)

**Innovation and development:** Even though Binghamton University is committed to its residential identity, the University should continuously encourage and incentivize innovation and experimentation with online and hybrid learning models. Not only will this help the University to encourage an atmosphere of continuous improvement for existing online courses, but it will also help to encourage ongoing innovation in traditionally-taught and hybrid courses.

- We recommend that the University develop an appropriate means to facilitate faculty exploration of new approaches in online instruction. It will work closely with faculty who teach online courses, helping them to explore new ideas, assess their impact, and develop ways to extend the impact of the ideas that are most successful.

**Recommendations - Infrastructure**

We recommend that the initial implementation phase for online learning at Binghamton University be one of improvement of operations, offerings, and efficiencies. It is important that a clear definition of what constitutes “online learning infrastructure” be developed and used consistently throughout the
University. This will allow for clear and common reporting of financial impacts, growth opportunities and ongoing needs. This document defines “online learning infrastructure” as personnel, physical and logistical resources (as well as administrative polices) that support online teaching and learning.

In order to identify the specific infrastructure impacts, an operational framework for online learning should be clearly identified. In order to take full advantage of the efficiencies and opportunities of online learning, a quickly scalable infrastructure is required. This infrastructure should be capable of serving the full continuum of online learning offerings, from flipped classes to fully online degree programs. A nimble infrastructure will help to ensure that new programs do not lack critical infrastructure components and that we are not inefficiently spending capital on unused resources.

The scope and definition of online infrastructure were divided into three categories: learning management, content creation, and support services. These categories, plotted against the roles of the users of this infrastructure, provide the full ecosystem of online learning (Figure 1, Infrastructure Subcommittee report). The Task Force recommends that online infrastructure needs should be considered based on the role of the user rather than on a specific product. This will allow the University to plug in technology to fill the needed roles, or see where there is system overlap, rather than trying to stay current with one particular product (Figure 2, Infrastructure Subcommittee report).

With this in mind, specific recommendations for online infrastructure follow:

- We recommend Binghamton University be mindful that in an online learning model, the student, the instructor, and the support personnel may be performing their roles remotely and in locations where the technology infrastructure may be limited. Remote and guest lecturing to on-campus students can greatly improve with a fully realized online learning infrastructure. The University should explore additional support opportunities, such as third-party help desk services or external library services.

- We recommend that ITS services closely monitor data transmission speeds and increase capacity as required to assure a reliable connection for streaming media originating from off-campus. Internal campus communication runs on a quasi-gigabit network with 100 to 1,000 MBPS transmission speeds. This is extremely well-suited for on-campus delivery of materials. The commodity internet connection, with respect to the dorms, runs well below this threshold at certain times of the day. The average data connection speed is around 5.5 MBPS, dropping to around 2 MBPS in the late evening hours. With compression technology lowering the successful delivery speed of HD content to around 4 MBPS (and an average of closer to 10 MBPS), increasing this commodity internet connection for students in dorms will provide a more reliable connection to off-campus streaming media.

- We recommend that the University assess the need for and availability of help desk support for online teaching and learning outside of current operating hours, especially during the periods when the most online courses are offered. Currently, the help desk hours are 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Thursday and 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Friday. Help desk support functions can be augmented by developing and maintaining a comprehensive website with support information and up-to-date system documentation.

- We recommend the addition of an “Online Specialist” help desk role to provide advanced-level assistance to faculty, staff and students. This is a key component in helping to ensure online students have access to the same level of support options that traditional students enjoy. This role also provides necessary support to faculty to ease the transition to and adoption of online learning technologies.
• We recommend the Libraries continue integrating digital content to help ensure online students have the best possible access to materials for research and study. Policies, practices, partnerships and consortia with other libraries will prove fruitful for getting physical resources to a geographically distributed student body.

• We recommend that University Tutoring Services leverage collaborative technologies, allowing local tutors to connect with students regardless of their location. This eliminates numerous local (physical) barriers to tutoring opportunities as well as expanding the future reach of the tutoring service.

**Future Directions**

Given the rapid pace of change in the development of new technologies and in the development of new pedagogical approaches to improve teaching and student learning, it is essential that the University strive to remain current in these areas. Doing so will require ongoing effort and the establishment of appropriate practices and policies.

• We recommend that an additional survey be created with the guidance of the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment (OIRA) and distributed widely across the University, with the goal of establishing campus baselines with regard to technology and software and providing a gauge for benchmarking adoption of online learning both internally and externally to peer institutions. The survey should be administered periodically to monitor and gauge Binghamton University’s online learning environment.

• With the uncertainty surrounding Open SUNY, we recommend that the University should continue to monitor the future direction of this statewide initiative.

• We recommend the establishment of a high-level campus advisory body to provide broad input on the range of issues affecting online teaching initiatives and emerging technologies.

• We recommend that academic units adopt policies to address the policy gaps identified in this report, and that they continue to assess existing policies to determine whether these adequately address curricula delivered online.
Appendix A – Task Force Members

Co-Chairs
Don Loewen, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education/ Harpur College - German and Russian
Mark Reisinger, Harpur College - Geography

Members
Ben Andrus, University Libraries
Scott Craver, Watson School
Alison Dura, Decker School of Nursing
Suronda Gonzales, Languages Across the Curriculum/ Global Studies
Surinder Kahai, School of Management
Celia Klin, Associate Dean of Harpur College/Harpur College - Psychology
Matthew McConn, Graduate School of Education
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James Pitarresi, Assistant Provost and Executive Director of the CLT/Watson School (ex-officio)
Tom Sinclair, Community of College and Public Affairs
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Shannon Hilliker, CLT
Eric Machan Howd, CLT
Paula Russell, CLT
Appendix B – Subcommittee Reports