

**Texas A&M University - College of Agriculture & Life Sciences
Ad hoc Distance Education Committee
Final Report**

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Executive Summary

The Chronicle of Higher Education reported distance education is one of the fastest-growing -- and most controversial -- parts of higher education. As an example, Illinois colleges and universities reported a 71% increase in online enrollment and a 39% increase in distance education in 2001. The Chronicle also reported faculty members are concerned about extra work when they teach in the distance education program. Professors wanted an incentive system that attracts faculty, rather than a coercion system. Professors were generally paid extra when they develop distance education courses or teach them, but other issues important to faculty members included course enrollment caps and the security and privacy of distance education courses. The World Bank Group concluded that mixtures of technologies will always produce better educational results than any single technology. However, getting the optimum mixture requires planning, technological skill and content knowledge. Ultimately, educational effectiveness depends more on the quality of course design and the quality of instruction than on technology itself.

The Committee recognizes the importance of faculty engagement and the need for timely training and support for course development and delivery. Policies must embrace faculty equality and recognition for off-campus faculty members as well as resident faculty. There is a critical need for enhancing the infrastructure with shared responsibilities at the System, University, College and Department level. Systems to support students at a distance, including admission, degree planning, registration, and library access must be comparable to the support for resident students. A cooperative, collaborative relationship must exist among academic departments and research and extension units if distance education programs are to be successful. Policies must embrace equity, both in financial and programmatic priorities, among faculty members, departments, and units, as well as the college and university. Using distance education, there are many opportunities to provide access to high quality programs and technical certifications that will add educational value, economic worth, and quality of life for Texans.

The following primary recommendations are made as a result of this study:

- *Faculty engagement* is critical to success in distance education. Policies must address incentives for participation, load adjustment for course development and delivery, strategies to reduce or eliminate barriers, and equity for faculty appointments and graduate faculty membership. Faculty members must have convenient and timely access to technical assistance in educational planning, instructional design, delivery strategies, and course evaluation. There must be clear rewards for faculty engagement.
- *Sustainability* of distance education programs hinge on equitable policies for the distribution of income and expenses, accountability for faculty time, recognition of the contribution, and communicated positive impacts on departmental and unit strategic plans.
- *Infrastructure* for the design, development, delivery and evaluation of distance education is critical. Policies are needed for timely updating of educational technologies and increasing necessary bandwidth for course design and delivery. An organizational

model is needed to provide technicians for course development and renewal that meets faculty needs. Policies are needed to address student access, privacy, and intellectual property issues.

- *Student assistance* for distance learners should be equivalent to the assistance provided for resident students. A pricing model is needed that communicates the costs for courses and programs, qualifications for student aid, and realistic payment schedules for tuition and fees. Students need assurance for the timely delivery of courses in degree programs and certificates.

Faculty Issues

One cannot offer Distance Education courses or degrees without faculty to teach them. The issues of which faculty should teach these courses, how they will be trained, how they will be supported, and how they will be rewarded will be central to establishing a viable program. No less important will be the issues of faculty appointments and course loads, the impact of distance education programs on resident academic programs, faculty advising of students, and course development, delivery, and evaluation.

Faculty Interest and Experience

Opportunity. Many on- and off-campus Ag Program faculty members have voiced or demonstrated their interest in teaching via distance education. This offers an opportunity to enhance delivery of Ag Program courses both on and off-campus and to include additional expertise in our curriculums. It also gives off-campus faculty exposure to potential graduate students to work on projects at R&E centers.

Challenges. Some on-campus Ag Program faculty members have limited DE experience, and that experience is not uniformly distributed across departments. Some off-campus TAES and TCE faculty have interest in DE, but have little or no experience in DE delivery. Off-campus faculty members may not have support or resources for delivery of DE courses. Some Ag Program faculty members have no interest in teaching via DE. Off-campus units may be concerned about investing resources in DE unless the unit evaluation processes (e.g., Science Roadmap) include DE teaching.

Recommendation. The Ag Program must find ways to train and provide technical and instructional support to on-and off-campus faculty interested in DE, reward faculty members who participate in DE, and thereby interest others in this opportunity. The technical/instructional support should be at the same physical location as the instructor. The Ag Program should not force faculty into participating in DE activities.

Faculty Appointments and Graduate Faculty Membership

Opportunity. Off-campus faculty may wish to affiliate with on-campus departments to teach via DE. This affiliation could enhance the diversity of faculty expertise within departments and could foster additional joint research and outreach activities.

Challenges. Rules for Faculty Appointments and Graduate Faculty Membership are determined by the University and the Office of Graduate Studies (OGS), as well as by departments, and usually require the concurrence of the department's faculty. This may be a challenge when on-campus faculty members are not familiar with the background of off-campus faculty, or in rare instances wherein off-campus faculty members do not initially meet University or OGS requirements.

Recommendation. The Ag Program should promulgate the university's guidelines for Adjunct Faculty and Graduate Faculty Membership, so that all faculty will understand the rules as they are applied. Departments desiring DE teaching relationships with off-campus faculty can then effect the necessary appointments and membership.

Team Teaching

Opportunity. Team teaching enhances the knowledge and experience to which the students are exposed and offers the faculty opportunities for a more flexible teaching schedule.

Challenges. Team teaching can be confusing and frustrating for students if not well planned and executed. Team teaching lowers the credits given to the faculty members on the Teaching Load Credit Report, and thus neither team-teacher gets full credit for a 3-credit course. Team teaching requires good faculty relationships, communications and planning.

Recommendation. As long as the caveats above are considered, team teaching should be encouraged where possible and appropriate.

Faculty Load and Overload - Load Adjustment for Course Development

Opportunity. Faculty can be given "administrative" credits on the Teaching Load Credit Report when developing or adapting courses for DE. Thus they can be released from normal teaching duties for a semester or longer while developing DE courses.

Challenges. No "extra credit" is given on the Teaching Load Report for teaching via DE. Whereas a department head can give a faculty member time to develop a course, no funds are currently made available, the unit often has to find someone else to teach the professor's course, and the unit's total SCH generation suffers when a course is not taught. Many departments are already overextended on teaching loads and do not have the flexibility to shift loads unless temporary instructors are provided. Likewise, a professor's research and outreach activities often suffer while he/she is developing or delivering a DE course. This has caused some unit heads to advise junior faculty not to teach via DE.

Recommendation. The Ag Program should promulgate a policy in which it is understood that each department may be in the development of 1-2 DE courses per year, and thus 1-2 faculty in each unit will have release time from teaching. Funds should be made available to hire temporary lecturers to teach the professor's courses. Those developing or teaching via DE should be given extra credit on the Teaching Load Credit Report, extra salary (10 - 15%) while developing and delivering the course, TA support while developing and

delivering the course, and double credit on merit, promotion and tenure considerations. Likewise, it should be acknowledged on all evaluations that the professor's research, Extension, service, and other teaching/advising activities may decline to the extent that the person is teaching the equivalent of 2 courses for every DE course taught.

Faculty Recognition and Incentives

Opportunity. Teaching is a major component of COALS faculty evaluations, merit raise considerations, promotion and tenure, and departmental, COALS, and university-level awards.

Challenges. TAES and TCE faculty may not be aware of these opportunities, or may be concerned that they will not have access to such opportunities unless they have formal COALS salary/FTE appointments. Many faculty on and off-campus believe that they will not get extra credit (or a reduced TAES/TCE load) for the extra time and effort required for DE. Off-campus faculty may feel that TAES and TCE administrations do not support time invested in teaching.

Recommendation. If TAES or TCE is involved with teaching or team-teaching DE courses, they should have salaried COALS FTE appointments, or receive additional remuneration without COALS FTE appointments. Anyone teaching courses should have that activity considered when being evaluated for merit raises and promotions, regardless of appointment. All teaching faculty, regardless of appointment, should be eligible for teaching awards. Although many off-campus faculty members are not interested in tenure, 25%, 12-month COALS appointments can meet the requirement for consideration of tenure. The Ag Program administration should lobby the University administration to allow all faculty members with teaching appointments access to OGS, Office of Research, and Office of the Provost faculty grants. (See also Faculty Load Recommendations above for more faculty incentives)

Faculty Training Needs

Opportunity. Both the College and the University have facilities and personnel available for training faculty in DE technologies.

Challenges. DE technology changes rapidly, and training must be available continuously. Both on-and off-campus vary in their abilities to teach via DE, and even those with experience use vastly different technologies. Timeliness and access to technical support is critical.

Recommendation. The University offers free DE training and support for TTVN and Web-CT technologies. This should be the standard for all on-campus faculty training and support, as it has minimal costs to COALS and departments. The COALS DE office should be used to train and support off-campus faculty in DE technology, and should be directed to develop a plan to do so. In doing so, however, complementary technologies should be utilized.

Course Design and Content

Opportunity. Faculty members are free to design new courses, redesign existing courses, develop new degree programs, or redesign existing programs. Technology Assisted Learning can be used to enhance resident courses as well as to develop DE courses.

Challenges. Off-campus faculty may be less familiar with the thought processes that go into course or curricula design, the expectations for time and rigor, or the rules and procedures for modifying or developing courses or curricula. On-campus faculty may be unaware of the methods of Technology Assisted Learning. Courses that are in a degree program or certificate should have a similar look and feel.

Recommendation. The Ag Program should provide seminars and/or written guidelines on the development of courses and curricula. Departments should include off-campus faculty in their curricula committees and discussions about course and curricula matters. The Ag Program should develop an overall plan to inform all faculty members, both on and off-campus, about opportunities and technologies via Technology Assisted Learning.

Course Development

Opportunity. New courses, whether resident or DE, can be offered 3 times as 489 or 689 "experimental" courses. This allows for modifications of the course based on the experience of the faculty and the comments of the students.

Challenges. New courses may offer a larger challenge for development when being offered for the first time via DE.

Recommendation. Existing, resident courses may be easier to develop into DE courses, since content has already been established. Departments and individual faculty should decide which courses might be offered via DE and how they should be delivered. Collaboration among faculty at peer universities who have DE experiences should be

encouraged.

Course Delivery

Opportunity. Courses may currently be delivered in a variety of modes, including TTVN, WebCT, CD-Video, and video-streaming to home PCs. Multiple TTVN facilities exist on and off-campus. Both the University and COALS offer assistance in TTVN and web-based training for faculty. Asynchronous web-based courses offer flexibility to both the faculty member and to the student.

Challenges. Despite the large investment in TTVN facilities, many faculty members feel the technology is outdated, unreliable and does not function well. Broadcasting to multiple sites is exponentially more difficult. Frustrations with TTVN have turned off many faculty members to DE teaching. Few faculty members are familiar with video-streaming or web-based learning technologies.

Recommendation. Although TTVN offers the opportunity for on and off-campus faculty to "get their feet wet" in DE, TTVN should be viewed as an intermediary step towards DE. Asynchronous web-based courses, coupled with discussion and selected synchronous features, should be considered the standard. Eventually, all DE courses should be offered via the web.

Course Quality and Evaluation

Opportunity. The University has a well-established system for evaluating courses using student course evaluation data. There is substantial evidence that this may be the most reliable means of evaluating courses. There are also opportunities to include authentic learning assessments that include projects, activities, simulations and case studies. COALS has been involved in peer review of teaching as well, and individual departments have a variety of teaching evaluation systems. The campus Center for Teaching Excellence is an excellent resource.

Challenges. DE courses must have the same quality of education as residential courses. Many students, parent or faculty may not value DE courses or degree programs to the extent that they value on-campus courses or degree programs.

Recommendation. The Ag Program must promulgate the national and local data that is available comparing residential learning versus DE learning. Faculty participating in both forms of teaching should document and publish their comparative results. The

COALS DE office should be directed to interact with the CTE to find ways of assisting off-campus faculty with learning teaching techniques and technologies, and with course evaluation methodologies.

Faculty Advising of Graduate Students

Opportunity. The addition of TAES and TCE faculty to the pool of faculty advising graduate students enhances the diversity of advisors to the benefit of the graduate students. It also increases the access of off-campus faculty to potential graduate students.

Challenges. Currently, the University requires that off-campus faculty may only co-advise graduate students, thus making many off-campus faculty feel like second-class citizens. Some off-campus faculty may not have knowledge of courses and other opportunities on campus. In addition, if departments enroll a large number of M.Agr. students, there may be problems in finding faculty interested in advising them or participating in graduate committees.

Recommendation. The Ag Program should request that the Office of Graduate Studies allow each department to determine Full and Associate membership in their Graduate Faculties, and who should be allowed to solely advise or co-advise graduate students. Students solely advised by off-campus faculty should be told to use their graduate committee for advice as to which courses and instructors to choose during their residence on campus. Departments should be given the flexibility to modify their M.Agr. advising systems to accommodate students enrolling under these plans.

Summary

The Committee clearly feels that in order for COALS to develop a viable distance education program, we must provide incentives for and eliminate barriers to participation by faculty. Questions of faculty appointments, graduate faculty status, teaching loads, recognition and financial incentives, and training and support must be answered up front. The means by which courses are developed, delivered, and evaluated may vary, but within parameters set by the College. These policies should be standard throughout the College, and will require the identification of financial and FTE resources if the program is to be successful.

Infrastructure Issues

The infrastructure for operating an effective distance education program within the Texas A&M University System is in place, and an administrative hierarchy oversees its maintenance and prepares continually for its upgrading. The TAMU System is attempting to coordinate distance education for all system universities under the auspices of the Distance Learning Council. The System has established the TAMUS online portal, [Http://texascampus.tamus.edu](http://texascampus.tamus.edu), and would like to see this portal evolve into a “one stop shop” for interested students to select courses from any system institution. Currently, the primary resources utilized with distance education are the Internet and Internet2 connections, Trans-Texas Video Network (TTVN), PolyCom (H.323), WebCT courseware system, and technology training and support activities associated with each technology. Additional needs for

the development of advanced distance offerings include obtainment of physical locations; personnel for instructional design, animations, materials development, and delivery assistance; access and security of buildings; bandwidth and transmission requirements; course development and scheduling, and methods of delivery.

Facilities

Opportunity. Faculty members in the Ag Program have abundant access to modern information technology. The existing TTVN videoconferencing system includes over 120 sites, all Research and Extension Centers, and many county extension offices. Sites are present in all major population centers in the state. The process of upgrading TTVN to include H.323 video conferencing capabilities and an OC-3 connection to Internet2 are underway and should be completed. Much of the DE technologies run along side of communication and data transmission on T-1 lines. Cost for facilities and transmission should be separated and distributed among the multiple uses of the technologies and facilities.

Challenges. The aging TTVN infrastructure is being updated and upgraded using TIF funds to include capability for courses and meetings by synchronous teleconferencing; some capability exists for simultaneous streaming. Individuals can connect via a PolyCom (H.323) bridge from virtually anywhere.

Recommendations. A long-range plan should be developed to communicate the upgrades and replacement of technology and facilities.

Technicians for Courseware Design and Development

Opportunity. The major courseware system in place at Texas A&M University and at six of the nine sister universities in the TAMU System is WebCT. TAMU provides faculty access and training for WebCT without a charge to the respective teaching programs. Licensing costs are recovered by a TAMU Office of Distance Education charge of \$100 per student per course. TCE provides access to and support for a proprietary system, the TCE Online Campus with capabilities similar to WebCT.

Challenges. Departments and individuals operate group/individual Web servers with limited capability, and their configurations are many and varied.

Recommendation. It is widely acknowledged among the distance education community that some form of Web-based education is the current preferred method of delivery. Web-based learning can be asynchronous, interstate, and international, and it usually does not depend on a physical site for the “classroom.” Interactivity can be obtained via synchronous chat, email, or bulletin boards. Courses that are part of a degree program or certificate should have a similar “look and feel” for students and faculty members.

The TAMU Office of Distance Education provides coordination and limited support for distance education via all methods, including course listings, degree announcements, linking to ancillary resources (including library support), and the capability for online registration. Additionally, the TAMU ODE is now entering the Continuing Education arena.

Access and Security of Buildings

Opportunity. Distance education can provide increased access to courses, programs and certificates. The work of the faculty member and the student may shift from a synchronous face-to-face meeting to asynchronous teaching and learning. Faculty members have access to TAMU Computing and Information Services and TCE Extension Information Technology unit which provide networking and connection support for on and off-campus units, respectively.

A number of offices provide asynchronous support for the conceptualization, design, and delivery of distance learning instruction including the TAMU Instructional Technology Services (formerly LOT), Computing and Information Services (CIS, extensive training via short courses), the Digital Library, the TMI Faculty (loosely organized interdisciplinary faculty with interests/expertise in technology-mediated instruction).

Challenges. More than anything else, advancement of the Ag Program distance education effort is a “people” problem. Few people question that technology-assisted learning will be an important part of the university community of the future. Few faculty members question whether online teaching represents a significant increase in workload for academic faculty. For faculty members with joint appointments, that workload is compounded by teaching when teaching is a “minor” component of their position descriptions and work environment is typically research and extension focused. Much of the work will be conducted after normal working hours of Research and Extension Centers.

Recommendation. A policy is needed to describe procedures for after-hours access and after-hours security of buildings used in distance education delivery. A policy is also needed to describe the collection of use fees and distribution of costs associated with increased access and security.

Technicians for Delivery Assistance

Opportunity. The TTVN network already carries 175 graduate classes and over 5,000 meetings yearly. Competition for available network time slots and room availability will increase. TTVN requires on-site personnel at each location to operate equipment and/or facilitate the class.

Challenges. Currently, there are no provisions to assign technical staff to facilitate distance teaching, either on or off-campus. Few faculty members have experience in preparing courses for and delivering courses in the Web-based mode. While TTVN courses are more similar to “traditional” teaching in their face-to-face, synchronized delivery, high-interactivity nature, they, too, are fraught with their own technical difficulties for the instructor.

Recommendation. Allow individual units to determine the best hardware/software system for delivery of their teaching program based on the needs of their student audience; devise an appropriate incentive/reward structure to encourage and facilitate course delivery; and develop internal mechanisms to review and recognize the workload associated with technology assisted instruction.

Summary

Administration should treat distance education programs in the same way as the remainder of the College’s teaching program. Courses are organized and taught by faculty, curricula are organized and monitored by Departments and/or interdisciplinary programs, and the College provides oversight to the process. Departments and faculty, then, have the principal responsibility for determining which courses and programs are suitable for distance delivery, and which technology best meets their needs.

What should be apparent is that the faculty as a whole, and most departments and programs, do not feel they have the responsibility for or have the capability of delivering significant amounts of their program at a distance. The role of College Administration, then, is to encourage faculty, departments and programs to increase their participation in distance course offerings using the support and financial resources that it has at its disposal.

Student Issues

Michael Moore noted that the *"highest degree of distance occurs when a person studies without any support at all."* The distance education program should focus on reducing this distance through the creation of an effective student support system. Moore concluded that this can be achieved through the acquisition of a thorough understanding of the needs of the distance learner while retaining the level of autonomy which make this option so attractive.

Student Needs and Target Audience

Opportunity. A needs assessment conducted by the TAMUS determined a strong need for teacher certification; the Electronic Teachers College was formed to provide alternative certification programs. This is an opportunity for the Agricultural Education Department (Agricultural Science Program). A well-designed community needs assessments will reveal more opportunities.

Challenges. The System plans to conduct another needs assessment this year. Dr. LeAnn McKenzie, TAMUS, is interested in the findings of our report and would like to work with us on this opportunity. The primary audience is graduate programs. We are beginning to develop continuing education and some high-need undergraduate degrees or courses from R&E Centers that support on-campus degree programs.

Recommendations. A systematic study of the needs of distance education students will provide a basis for program development. Generally, distance education learners tend to be older, mid-career students who are seeking career advancement. Women are more likely to enroll in distance education programs than men.

Uniform Fee Structure

Opportunity. According to the Office of Distance Education at TAMU, this will not happen in the near term. According to LeAnn McKenzie, this is a point of discussion with the chief academic officers in looking at revamping the 110102 regulations.

Challenges. Students are often confused by varying fee structures within a degree program.

Recommendation. A clear pricing policy is needed that includes the tuition and fees appropriate for the course and degree program. Students need to know the cost of the degree before they enroll.

Processes for Online Admission, Including G-6 Status and Registration

Opportunity. Here are the basic steps at TAMU: A student finds out about programs/courses through a web-page or other sources. The student can apply online to the university application forwarded to graduate studies and then to departments. There are also a few certificates. The student may apply as G-6 (non-degree seeking) or a temporary student. The student may also register for continuing education courses. Other support services are available, such as financial aid, library, computer support, etc. Once a student is admitted into a program, he/she can register online or over the telephone. Some

instruction is necessary because a student unfamiliar to campus would not have a neo account or know how to use the bonfire scheduling system. After being registered, the student can then pay online.

Challenges. Many students get lost between application and delivery of application to the respective departments.

Recommendation. A streamlined procedure is needed to notify the department of admission requests. Once admitted, there is a need for assistance in course selection and enrollment. Student services are needed to represent the distance student in the payment of fees, scheduling of courses and other barriers.

Undergraduate and Graduate Student Support

Opportunity. TAMU has CIS and WebCT support for undergraduate students through the labs, web-pages, and telephone. Graduate students enrolled in 700 sections have access to distance student library support services. Non-degree seeking students are enrolled at and have access to the same services as undergraduate and graduate students. Certification programs are program specific and are not directly supported by university support services. Each program must generate funds to take care of these services. The need exists to work with TAMUS to determine community needs in developing new courses/programs. Also, the need exists to develop courses to augment and strengthen the three existing M.Ag. degrees

Challenges. Providing timely information to students and faculty on available student support services.

Recommendation. Add instructions on CLAIM/NEO accounts to the Office of Distance Education-Agriculture Program pages. Notify distance faculty of available student support services and procedures so they may link to this information on their course websites. Designate one person within a department or unit to assist with distance education student issues.

Summary.

Because the distance education student is often non-traditional and unfamiliar with the conventions of admission, enrollment, course work and examinations, special effort is needed to create an effective student support system that is articulated among the university, college and department.

Degree & Certificate Issues

Teaching, training and continuing education is taking place at a distance from TAMU. Currently, COALS has the Master of Agriculture Degree approved for distance delivery by the State College Coordinating Board and the Provost of TAMU. All 19 Master of Agriculture degree programs currently offered by COALS are approved for distance delivery. The College also offers a joint doctorate in Agricultural Education with Texas Tech University. Degrees

earned at a distance are the same as those earned on campus. With such an explosion of distance offerings, some semblance of continuity is needed in relation to course offerings, degrees and certificates, and requirements.

Needs Assessment for Courses, Degrees, and Certificates

Opportunity. The needs assessments which have been done are anecdotal in nature and only in selected areas. Since the only way courses can be taught at a distance is for faculty to convert course materials, does it make any difference whether or not there is a large or small demand for the distance programs? At least 30 inquiries per month for masters distance programs come in to COALS Office of Distance Ed., but unless the faculty members teach their courses at a distance, new masters programs will not be developed regardless of the demand.

Challenges. Needs assessment requires skilled individuals and a fair amount of money to do properly. Is there any point in doing expensive needs assessment unless there are enough faculty members to provide the distance courses to answer the demand?

Recommendation. Continue to do this in a more systematic way by interested faculty members.

Identify Degrees that Accommodate Distance Courses

Opportunity. All degrees that are currently offered could accommodate distance courses. In addition, courses could be designed to serve as supporting courses for existing degree programs or certificates until a new program is fully developed.

Challenges. Offering some courses which require labs presents a challenge. However, several unique tools for teaching labs at a distance have been developed. Some graduate students in the Master of Ag. programs have taken 685 courses with scientists at Blacklands Experiment station, and others learned a great deal of laboratory techniques doing internships in Experiment Station labs and in local hospital labs.

Recommendation. Continue to identify promising new degree programs and certificates and explore new strategies for providing laboratory experience and supervision.

Develop Degree Plan and Course Schedule (Course/semester/year/time)

Opportunity. Students will benefit from a communicated course delivery schedule and a clear procedure for the development of a degree plan. Students value courses that fit into degree plans or certification programs.

Challenges. Each degree plan should have a proposed schedule for course offerings that will allow degree completion within a reasonable time period.

Recommendation. A published schedule of courses over the span of time required for the degree should be available for distance students. Courses should be available at Research

and Extension Centers to provide access to distance students and ensure these can be applied through transfer credit.

Master of Agriculture

Opportunity. M.Agr is appropriate as provided in the TAMU Graduate Catalog to be offered as a distance education-provided degree, with the recommendations listed below. The design of the M.Agr to emphasize problem-solving skills for students with a management orientation is a good fit, and is possibly a large market.

Challenges. M.Agr programs with laboratory course requirements might not be appropriate, or needs innovative new approaches. Many programs need more degree-plan courses available to be taken at a distance. Off-campus faculty members are often appropriate advisors for these students with a more applied orientation because these faculty members are often also more applied in orientation. The major limitation to M.Agr by distance education is the lack of available courses.

Recommendation. Ensure that residence requirements of students can be met, i.e. informally present through an Area Research & Extension Center. This supports the philosophy to encourage interaction with faculty, participation in seminars, and provide access to libraries and laboratories.

Alter requirements to allow off-campus faculty to chair committees. If the basis for the original requirement was to have an advisor for face-to-face meetings, then the basis is gone. Enhancements in communication technology have eased the ability to advise from the distance.

Retain requirements for advisory committee, professional internships (when appropriate), degree plan, professional paper, final exam, so that students continue to receive individualized quality experience.

Recommend retention of requirement for final examination to be scheduled either as a face-to-face meeting or using appropriate technology.

Graduate School Policies

Opportunity. Since the Graduate School has revamped its web site and even residential students use the forms off the web, there is really very little difference between residential and distance students in the graduate school policies.

Challenges. Residency requirements must be worked out.

Recommendation. The Graduate School has done a good job of making forms and information available on its web site. Serious thought should be given to eliminate the need for immunization certificates for distance students, however.

Other Degrees such as Master of Ag Business and Master of Education

Opportunity. Each department in COALS has the opportunity to decide which of its many degrees may be offered at a distance. The Master of Science degree without a thesis is certainly a candidate for many of the science-based departments in our college. The Ag. Economics department has an opportunity to offer the Master of Ag. Business degree at a distance. The Ag.Ed. department could offer a Master of Education program at a distance.

Challenges. The decision to offer courses and degree programs rests with the faculty. The challenge is to lead and to motivate the faculty to develop these distance programs.

Recommendation. Incentives for faculty participation could be developed by the administration in conjunction with interested faculty members.

Summary

There are certain areas uniquely taught by COALS faculty that are needed by other institutions, industry and government agencies. Expertise in the areas contained in COALS can be of great value to the people of Texas and other states or countries if they are available at a distance. Faculty members at TAMU can bring perspective and knowledge of subject matter to add value to distance programs. Initially, courses should be developed that complement and support existing M.Ag degrees and which have promise as expanded M.Ag programs. While there will be some applications for synchronous delivery of some distance courses, the majority of courses delivered at a distance will be delivered asynchronously via the Internet.

Student Management Issues

In order to implement a successful distance education program, administrators must address several student management issues. Facilitating an admissions and registration process that takes some of the “distance” out of the distance education experience would enhance the program’s perception across the state and provide an excellent foundation on which to build a strong distance education presence.

Admission Timing Options (Cohort v. Open v. Traditional)

Opportunity. Admissions options include the opportunity to enter students on a flexible schedule not tied to a semester time frame. This could lead to a more year-round enrollment and reduce heavy loads during regular admission times. A traditional admission program is another option in which the students would enter during a defined admissions period following a semester time frame. This is the most common form used by the campus. An additional option is to admit students in specific programs as a cohort allowing courses to be offered in a rotational fashion adjusting teaching loads as needed. Admissions directly impacts program offerings and the time frame used to complete classes. If admissions are allowed to be flexible, the time frames for class completions would also need to be flexible. This could impact positively or negatively program completion time.

Challenges. The type of admission (cohort v. open) needs to reflect the needs of the

specific program. A single policy will not fit here. The method or methods chosen need to maximize effectiveness in delivery and access. The benefits of cohort or traditional admissions for the web-based format include a time frame that encourages a student to complete courses in a timely fashion. Student progress in a course is more easily monitored while updating a course is more efficient as there are not any students active in the course. In addition, interaction between students can be enhanced through tools such as threaded discussions and chat. The benefits of a cohort admission for compressed video classes include the opportunity to rotate courses to balance faculty load. A traditional admission also prevents the need to have a constant repetition of topic delivery for compressed video classes. Contrastingly, open admission provides the greatest flexibility for student degree completion and integrates well with fully automated web courses. It is also useful for certificate or continuing education options that do not have to be tied to a semester time frame. One difficulty is that a faculty member has to be more dedicated to a distance class with this option as they may have to continuously monitor their course throughout the year and they may have students active in all of the different stages of the course at the same time. Flexible course completion dates also tends to discourage course completion.

Recommendation. Encourage individual units to determine if they wish to focus their distance teaching program by compressed video or by web-based instruction. This may provide the information needed for a unit to decide on the method and type of admission they wish to utilize (cohort v. open v. flexible).

Admissions to Program Type (Degree v. non-degree v. certificate)

Opportunity. There is an increasing demand for programming outside of the traditional degree options. Individuals are returning to institutions of higher education in order to retool for a new career. Adults are looking for certificate programs with 4 or 5 courses in a focus area in order to advance their current careers. Other potential students are looking for personal enrichment programming.

Challenges. Difficulties arise in determining the appropriate type of programs to offer to our clientele. We can not be all things to all people. A priority needs to be established in order to determine which areas to concentrate our time and resources.

Recommendation. Individual units should be encouraged to identify the need for certificate or continuing education programs for their discipline. Feedback from industry organizations or advisory boards should be considered to help complete the view of future needs.

Student Course Registration

Opportunity. Online registration meets requirements for distance education by providing access to the University for procedural tasks. The website could be a source for recruitment into specific programs and courses via the course descriptions and an e-mail link to the instructor of record.

Challenges. Clear provisions for collaborative courses between institutions currently do not exist. None of the course registration options provide for the possibility of collaborative courses taught by several institutions or for courses sent to TAMU by other institutions. Computing skill or travel required for course completion is also not readily available.

Recommendation. Have clear requirements outlining the minimum computing requirements necessary and the travel that may be required to complete the course. It would be beneficial to provide detailed course descriptions so that students are provided an opportunity to “shop before they buy” a course. Identify an internal mechanism that will allow collaborative courses to be provided in such a format so that all campuses involved benefit.

The current website is very clear on how to obtain a G7 graduate student status or a G6 non-degree graduate status. A similar type of procedure at the undergraduate level would prove beneficial for individuals seeking only a limited number of classes. The online links back to the departmental advisor provides students admitting over the web with an identified contact in the department to help address any questions or problems. A similar resource for non-degree undergraduate and certification program participants would also be beneficial.

Graduate Committee Structure

Opportunity. Faculty members at other system campuses, along with research and extension personnel, provide a rich resource for graduate committee expertise.

Challenges. Communication between students and distance committee members is demanding. In addition, students have little opportunity to become familiar with off-campus faculty capable of providing expertise for their projects.

Recommendation. Facilities to allow for distance conferencing are in place (TTVN, PolyCom, conference calls) allowing for participation from remote faculty in graduate committee meetings. Express mail, fax and e-mail access also provide for timely response potential by off-campus members.

Students should be encouraged to plan regular meetings several weeks in advance to facilitate communications. If the committee chair is not in the same location as the student, a co-chair may need to be considered at the student's location. Interaction with committee members should be made more than just at committee meetings. An occasional update e-mail would accomplish this. Increasing student interaction with potential committee members needs to be encouraged.

Student Evaluations

Opportunity. Student evaluations provide a snapshot of a course allowing the instructor to identify areas of excellence and items of concern.

Challenges. Student access at a distance to course evaluations may be of some concern.

Recommendation. This area needs additional study to develop an appropriate evaluation instrument for distance education. Evaluation templates could be provided on the web to allow students to complete and submit their evaluation of their course without being on the campus. Faculty could choose from a list of optional questions that will help them tailor the evaluation to match their delivery type. The question bank for this process currently exists so implementation would not be difficult.

Summary

The opportunities that the evolution of distance education brings to educational institutions are equally weighted with opportunities to change, modify, and expand current methods of admission procedures, course registrations, and communication among and between the students, instructors, and committee members. While a variety of methods have been explored, modified, and implemented, administrators will need to ensure that instructors who plan distance classes have ample resources to utilize in their teaching and communication with students.

Department-Research & Extension Center Issues

Several considerations and issues relevant to the future of distance education are pertinent to Ag Program units and their missions. Clearly educational technologies will be an important part of the teaching-learning process of the university. Many of the issues discussed in the other areas of this report are important to unit heads concerned with overall Ag Program success. The topics discussed in this section will be limited to those which are perceived to directly impact the policies, operations, budgets and accomplishments of the on- and off-campus units. These issues relate to responsibility for expenses, distribution of income and faculty duties, time management and impacts on unit missions and goals.

Distribution of Income and Expenses

Opportunity. State-wide location of TAMU Agricultural Research and Extension Centers offer access to citizens across the state to courses taught through TTVN and other means. Graduate and undergraduate student education at these centers has been accomplished in the past and can be expanded in the future to include distance education.

Challenges. Currently, some of the expense of teaching a distance education course at a research and extension center relates to maintenance of equipment and facilities. Managers have been told that a room charge may be assessed for use of a facility; however, users often resent these charges and reasonable charges are not adequate to cover all appropriate costs. Center funds (TAES and TCE) are being used to cover cleaning and maintenance of rooms and local personnel to handle operating equipment and related duties. This has created a tension among unit managers, faculty, and students. Web-based courses do not use TTVN and could reduce this problem. Also, if infrastructure maintenance funds become available, this problem could be significantly reduced.

Both on- and off-campus units are impacted by budget constraints. The trend for Ag Program units to do more with less is fast reaching, if not past, the breaking point. Equitable distribution of student fees to the units which perform the teaching functions is imperative if the expectation of more involvement of all faculty members in distance education is to be realized. In turn, subsequent distribution of appropriate portions of this income to the involved faculty is necessary to ensure and enhance success.

Recommendation. Provision should be made by System and University administration to ensure funding to all units for actual costs incurred during course deliveries. Equitable distribution of course and student fees, as well as state appropriated funds, is essential for sustainable programming. Portions of these monies should be used as salary and program enhancement for involved faculty, as well as for covering infrastructure costs.

Faculty Duties and Time Management

Opportunity. Faculty located at research and extension centers represent a wealth of talent, training, and experience that would enhance the educational experience of graduate and undergraduate students. Involving these faculty in greater levels of educational activities, including distance education courses, offers the reward of enhanced student experience and training.

Challenges. Faculty located at research and extension centers are currently funded primarily by TAES and TCE. Their primary duties relate to the missions of these two agencies. Some off-campus teaching appointments are being made; this will likely increase with future faculty appointments. It is anticipated that changing appointments of current faculty members can and will be done, but will probably be somewhat limited due to faculty interests, expertise and current demands related to agency missions. Hiring new faculty to fill a position which is described as joint teaching with research and/or extension duties may be the primary approach to increase off-campus teaching responsibilities.

Accomplishing TAES and TCE missions is also a concern of all unit heads. Downsizing and budget constraints have reduced faculty FTEs in all units; however, clientele and mission-

related needs and demands have not diminished. Joint teaching appointments for current faculty and new hires bring with them concerns of equitable time allocation by faculty and related issues. On the other hand, joint appointments will help to broaden faculty expertise by spreading agency and college funds across more individuals, but will not increase total FTEs under constrained fiscal conditions.

Recommendation. Administrative decision-makers should consider the comprehensive situation and ensure that all missions of the Ag Program are addressed while striving to increase access to distance education by potential students. Decision-makers must address the core problems with adequate funding and demonstrate the proper sense of urgency. Perhaps 1) developing a central revolving or grant fund to be allocated through proposals for support of course development, 2) establishing a COALS oversight committee to monitor and manage activities, and/or 3) reorganizing current activities to increase utilization and impact should be explored. Realistic expectations with respect to faculty time allocation to each appointment component, adequate funding to ensure accomplishing all faculty and unit missions and critical evaluation of a unit's total mission are indicated.

Summary

While undergraduate and graduate education is important to all who are and have been involved in academic institutions, the other missions of the Ag Program are also important. Quite a lot of education has been done historically at TAMU Agricultural Research and Extension Centers; many graduate degrees and some undergraduate internships have been accomplished while being supported with TAES and TCE funds. Little or no funding from COALS has been provided. For many reasons, some very obvious, for these teaching activities to continue and expand, funding arrangements and other considerations of faculty time allocations and career success, as well as infrastructure and related needs, must be appropriately addressed.

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