

**Eastern Oregon University
Online Educational Support Services
Assessment**

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I. FINAL REPORT

Section I.a. Assessment Summary and Methodology

Consultant: Valerie Osland Paton, Ph.D., currently serves as Associate Vice Provost at Texas Tech University. TTU and Eastern Oregon are participants in the Department of Education Title IV Demonstration Project for Distance Learning. Dr. Paton has served as dean of institutional research, planning and effectiveness, assistant dean of student affairs, and principle investigator for a Title III Strengthening Institutions Grant. Her vita is included in the Appendix of this report.

Scope of Project: Conduct assessment of EOU educational support services for 43% of students who do not reside at the main campus in La Grande or Union County, with the underlying assumption that improvement of these services will positively impact all EOU students.

EOU departments/units included in assessment:

Admissions – Sherri Edvalson

Financial Aid – Eric Bucks

Distance Education – DDE Staff and Regional Center Directors

Learning Center – AnnaMaria Dill

Registrar – Dawna Flanagan and Debbie Rogers

Student Accounts – Shari Carpenter

Disability Services – Pat Arnson

Bookstore – Vicky Lamoreaux

IT – Paul Rowan, Jody Potter, Todd Richmond, Gary Moses, Jon Norris

Library Services – Diana Gleason and Lisa Bowman

Career Services – Danny Aynes

Student Conduct Code – Sheldon Nord and Colleen Cascio

Student Focus Groups:

Six DDE students from La Grande, Ontario and Baker

Three Extended Residency Business students, including a student/Coordinator from PGE Corporate University

Steps in assessment process:

1. Self-assessment instrument completed by units in order to identify non-face-to-face (F2F) resources at main campus, off-campus F2F resources,

current method of assessing services, documentation of assessment findings and utilization for improvement.

2. (a) Follow-up interviews and focus groups were conducted with unit and institutional leadership to gather data on their perceptions about specific strengths, best practices, dreams for service enhancement, and further assessment recommendations.
(b) Focus group with DDE students were conducted to gather data describing their perceptions of the highest priority educational support services and identify strengths/weaknesses in these interfaces.
(c) Observations by external consultant.
3. Evaluation of self-assessment, interview and focus group data. Standards were derived from Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET), Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) and best practices guidelines where appropriate.
4. A final report was prepared including a written summary of findings, evaluation, recommendations for online student support services enhancement, and recommendations for further assessment.

I.b. EOU Strengths

Identified through Self-Assessment, Interviews, Student Focus Groups and External Consultant Observations

- ▣ **EOU leads the state of Oregon in providing affordability and access to undergraduate distance education.**
 - 7 undergraduate degree programs in high demand disciplines and 2 graduate Education degree programs offered via distance or at off-campus sites across Oregon.
 - Highly affordable tuition for in-state students.
 - Flexible delivery design of programs to meet individual learning needs of place-bound students.
 - Statewide presence via partnerships with Oregon community colleges resulting in seamless degree pathways at 14 EOU Regional Centers and 2 School of Business sites.
 - Leveraged resources increasing student access to the education needed for leadership roles in the Oregon workforce.
 - Library services, supported by Oregon library infrastructure, that provide high degree of 24/7 access for all students.
 - Division of Distance Education services that are tailored to meet the needs of distance learners.

- ▣ **EOU leads the western U.S. in distance delivery of undergraduate programs.**
 - Only west coast public institution participant in Title IV demonstration project for financial aid, contributing to the assessment that will revise the Title IV distance education regulations in the Higher Education Reauthorization Act.
 - Offers in-state tuition rate for out-of-state students resulting in competitive positioning to serve U.S. place-bound and international students.
 - Faculty members are uniquely qualified as having one of the highest participation rates in distance delivery in the nation.

- ▣ **EOU fosters diversity of the student body by engaging students in distance delivered curricula.**
 - DDE students are primarily returning, adult, full-time employees who require local delivery of curricula in order to complete degrees.
 - Distance delivery opens access to students who cannot otherwise complete degree programs due to certified disabilities.
 - DDE provides learning opportunities for students with different learning styles.

I.c. Dreams for Educational Support Services Enhancement

Preface: K-12 and higher education in the U.S. is latently responding to a major economic shift from a manufacturing to a service economy. Institutions on the forward edge of the “service economy” shift in higher education delivery are experiencing significant organizational press to respond to changing student expectations. EOU is experiencing this press, due to the increasing proportion of students completing courses and degree programs at sites other than La Grande, Oregon. ***This fact is an positive indicator that EOU is responsive to Oregon’s initiatives for affordable, accessible and excellent higher education opportunities for its residents.***

Although there are many resources for “good practice” in distance education, they will rarely come from nation’s major research institutions because they are highly resistant to change. Although the major research institution model is useful for development of academic excellence in traditional academic environments, it assumes exclusion rather than inclusion of students. Public higher education distance education is inherently *inclusive*, focused on increasing access to learning opportunities provided by state governments and funded by taxpayers.

The best models for quality distance learning delivery and appropriate educational support services are being developed by cooperative efforts committed to academic excellence *and* access. Some of these resources include Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET) <http://wcet.info/resources/accreditation/> , Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching (MERLOT) <http://www.merlot.org/Home.po> , United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA) and state affiliates <http://www.usdla.org> , American Distance Learning Consortium (ADEC) <http://www.adec.edu/conf-work.html> . Regional accrediting bodies, such as NWCCU, have utilized the best practices standards generated by these associations to integrate distance learning standards into their comprehensive standards for institutions in the northwest (see WCET “Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs at <http://wcet.info/resources/accreditation/Accrediting%20-%20Best%20Practices.pdf>). The Council for the Advancement of Standards has integrated these standards into its Self-Assessment Guide for Educational Services for Distance Learners Standards and Guidelines (see <http://www.cas.edu>).

Assessment Findings: In this context of increasing press for organizational responsiveness and limited, established major research institutional models, institutions such as Eastern Oregon University struggle to develop long-term solutions. However, this assessment of the online educational support services environment at EOU has identified strengths in:

- ☐ Technical expertise and capacity in educational support services leadership and environments.
- ☐ Strong sense of professional connection to external associations providing best practice standards in each of the participating educational support services units.
- ☐ Advanced engagement of faculty in course development and delivery, with broad participation and utilization of technology-assisted course delivery.
- ☐ Adequate software platforms in Banner and BlackBoard to build most solutions required for short-term educational support services enhancement.

In addition to these strengths, the self-assessment instrument, interviews and focus groups identified consistent themes that need to be addressed with follow-up actions by EOU leadership. These were shared with the Provost, Vice President of Administration and Finance, Interim Dean of the Division of Distance Education, and new Director of Institutional Research at the Exit Interview on August 11, 2005. The consistent themes identified by the various assessment activities fall into the following categories:

- ☐ ***Long-term Strategic Planning*** The need for an institutional strategic plan that includes strategies to leverage and promote EOU's unique strengths in distance and technology-assisted learning.
- ☐ ***Short-term Tactical Planning and Problem Resolutions*** to address the need for integration of seamless, excellent customer service, high "touch" online educational support services for all students.
- ☐ ***Organizational leadership resolution*** to provide stability and continuity to the Division of Distance Education and facilitate short-term tactical planning and problem resolution.
- ☐ ***Institutional research and assessment activities*** that provide data for decision-making in support of long-term and short-term planning and problem resolution.

Recommendations for implementation in each of these four categories of assessment findings are included in Section II, Online Educational Support Services Assessment Finding and Recommendations. These recommendations are made with the 2008 NWCCU reaffirmation process in mind. In addition, the Consultant's underlying assumption is that all distance delivered academic programs and educational support services must be comparable to those

delivered F2F at EOU (See WCET “Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs <http://wcet.info/resources/accreditation/Accrediting%20-%20Best%20Practices.pdf>). In early discussions, Provost Miller inquired about services to high school in dual enrollment programs; the recommendations provided in Section II will provide for a largely online environment that is optimal to support high school dual enrollment students located away from the La Grande Valley.

Organizational Structure

President Fatemi inquired about optimal organizational structures for the delivery of distance and off-campus education. These structures vary widely depending upon the size, mission and history of the higher education institution. However, most of the distance learning organizational structures can be included in the following three categories:

- I. Stand-alone institutions with degree granting authority.**
See University of Texas Telecampus at <http://www.telecampus.utsystem.edu/>
See Penn State World Campus / On-line education at <http://www.worldcampus.psu.edu/wc/index.shtml>
- 2. Distance learning divisions with separate academic authority located as a college, school or division within an institution.**
See University of Minnesota at www.cce.umn.edu/idl
See Brigham Young University at <http://ce.byu.edu/is/site/aboutus/index.cfm>
- 3. Fully integrated academic offerings with specialized educational support services.**
See Texas Tech University at www.de.ttu.edu
See Kansas State University <http://www.dce.ksu.edu/dce/distance/index.html>

An examination of EOU's current organizational structure for distance education places it in the third category, with distance learning curricula and delivery centered in the respective academic unit, the Library and IT reporting to the Provost, and specialized educational support services centered in the Division of Distance Education. Since educational support services include such functions as instructional technology, curricular development will be a function that is led by faculty and academic units, but supported by DDE via BlackBoard and programming resources and expertise. Since this is a similar configuration to that at the Consultant's home campus (Texas Tech University), she has an inherent bias toward the benefits of organizational structures which integrate technology and pedagogy, and create seamless academic resources available to all

students. Given the successful history and performance of this organizational structure at EOU, the Consultant recommends that the current structure be strengthened by a careful analysis on revenues and appropriate revenue sharing that would provide for adequate resources to support the recommendations cited in Section II.

Concluding Remarks

Despite existing tensions about the growth in DDE students and the need to expand on-campus services to provide a seamless environment for all students, the staff and administrators who contributed to this assessment were deeply committed to the success of students. There was significant interest in this assessment process as a means to bring teams together to resolve problems, even when each unit was stretched to address the press of current responsibilities for student services.

Given this healthy commitment to problem resolution, many respondents and interviewees invested a significant amount of time and expertise in making the process a productive one. The participating staff members at EOU have tremendous knowledge about how to resolve the issues that surfaced in the assessment process. EOU leadership can engage this knowledge and expertise by empowering the educational support services leadership to address the issues cited in Section II with specific tactical activities and support their resolutions with adequate resources and funding plans. The timetables for these resolutions will be dependent upon available funding, but incremental progress toward completion of the resolutions can be planned and assessed so that accomplishment is ensured.

Notes about Assessment Data

In addition to Section II, the students, staff and administrators involved in the assessment process contributed many more meritorious recommendations for problem resolution and services enhancement. These are preserved in the records of their interviews in Section IV, and their Self-Assessment Instruments in Section V. The data in Section IV is a result of notes taken by the consultant, which were returned to the respondent for revision and final approval prior to inclusion with this report. The student focus groups notes were not submitted to the various participants for review.