

## **University of North Carolina Summary Report**

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### **E-Learning as a Strategic Asset for UNC**

#### Introduction

This report and set of suggested actions was developed following a series of conversations with members of the University of North Carolina community including representatives from the Board of Governors, General Administration (UNCGA) staff, and institutional representatives in October, 2012, a review of reports and documents provided prior to and during the two day visitation, and regional and national reports on e-learning and current trends and future directions in higher education. The report was developed to assist UNCGA staff in crafting a strategy for e-learning in the system. It was constructed around the 'UNC: Our Time, Our Future' framework outlined by President Ross, wherein he defined five broad goals to ensure North Carolina's 'long-term economic competitiveness.' Those goals included:

1. Set Degree Attainment Goals Responsive to State Needs
2. Strengthen Academic Quality
3. Serve the People of North Carolina
4. Maximize Efficiencies
5. Ensure an Accessible and Financially Stable University.

E-learning can support, and in some cases lead, in the attainment of these goals. Further, the approach outlined through a series of suggestions builds on existing e-learning resources that can, with some enhancements and an emphasis on leadership, at both the system and institutions levels, move North Carolina's efforts to the forefront of e-learning nationally. All of the elements are in place, there is a commitment to moving in a coordinated fashion, and a willingness to extend the reach of UNC. It is time to act.

## Trends in E-learning

The general public in 2012 has 'discovered' e-learning. The MOOC phenomena (or mania) has pushed e-learning on to the front pages of popular media and editorial pages. But in reality, e-learning has been part of the academic landscape, and part of an ongoing discussion (and debate) for some time. That debate, in part, comes from a growth curve documented in a series of national reports on the growing number of students engaged in online learning. The latest report from the Babson Survey Research Group, a series commissioned by the Sloan Foundation and Sloan Consortium, indicates that almost a third of all U.S. college students took at least one online course in 2011. Moreover the growth curve in for online learning continues to outpace traditional enrollment increases (on a percent growth basis), a trend that is expected to continue in the future. To be sure, e-learning is now part of the landscape nationally and internationally. It is no longer the latest higher education 'fad' and, indeed, is moving to the mainstream of higher education institutions. The focus on distance, i.e. delivery of instruction to students distant from traditional campuses with no other access options, has been replaced by students, on or near campuses, opting for the flexibility and, increasingly the quality, of e-learning.

A recent study by Ernest and Young made the following prediction: 'Our primary hypothesis is that the dominant university model—a broad-based teaching and research institution supported by a large asset base and a large, predominantly in-house back office—will prove unviable in all but a few cases over the next 10-15 years.' While the focus of the report entitled *University of the Future...A Thousand Year Old Industry on the Cusp of Profound Change*. While the report was commissioned and targeted higher or tertiary education in Australia, the similarities to the U.S. higher education structure, albeit with a significant difference in size, raises the question as to whether this is the future of higher education in the U.S. The report outlined several trends that are driving change, including the 'democratization of knowledge and access' (essentially that that university no longer held both the originator and keep roles in knowledge generation and

dissemination due to online access) and ‘digital technologies’ which are transforming all elements of life and work—and is doing the same in the education sector. While the study suggests campuses will remain, technologies will ‘transform how education is delivered and accessed.’

Among several quotes from university leadership in Australia was this ominous note: ‘The traditional university model is the analogue of the print newspaper...15 years max, you’ve got the transformation.’

So what does this suggest for e-learning? Can transformative activities put in place now make the analogue to newspapers an erroneous one? Several trends are emerging that indicates this need not be the case, and suggest strategies that can, and should emerge, to ensure the continued existence, growth and responsiveness of higher education in the U.S.

1. The distinction between e-learning and on campus instruction will continue to diminish and will do so rapidly in the next few years as the integration or ‘mainstreaming’ of technology continues. These efforts will simply be called learning.
2. Technology ‘tools’ will be ubiquitous and more mobile and will change how students want to and will engage in learning. The challenge will be for institutions to bring the university to the device as the student population brings the device to the university wherever they might be located during their educational experience.
3. Faculty acceptance of these changing models, and their development and adoption of new learning environments, will be a continuing challenge, in some measure as the professoriate is changed by e-learning. National studies continue to reflect a begrudging acceptance of e-learning, which is at odds with results from the same studies that indicates chief academic officers view

e-learning as critical to the long-term strategy and success of their institutions.

4. Faculty roles will change—dramatically—fueled by the impact of MOOCs including how courses are offered, when they are offered and the size and scope of offerings. While acceptance might lag, there is little question that faculty roles are and will change. While not every faculty member wants, or should be engaged in massive e-learning courses, courses enrolling 160,000 students from around the globe—and technically free—is already altering traditional faculty engagement.
5. Blended or hybrid learning, combining some level of e-learning and traditional classroom instruction in courses and programs, is gaining more and more traction in the academy. Positive results (outcomes) from limited assessment have been documented and as a 'bridge' from traditional classroom instruction e-learning, blended structures are attractive. Students also like this format and often do their own blending irrespective of institutional efforts.
6. New competitors, both academic and non-academic, will provide increasing challenges for traditional institutions. While the growth of the for-profit sector, with much of the instructional activity being offered through e-learning has slowed (indeed recent reports reflect enrollment decreases), the reasons appear to have less to do with the mode of delivery and more about the legitimacy of the instruction programming. Further, new credit accumulation businesses where students can enroll and pay a low monthly registration fee and a small course cost and participate in online and competency-based credit activities, are attracting increasing interest. Learners now have the option of a full 'Freshman Year Experience' for \$1200 (earlier on sale for \$999) from StraighterLine, a new venture seeking to promote access via low-cost online and competency-based efforts.

7. Competency-based learning is gaining great favor and the erosion away from 'seat time' measures will continue to grow, not only for adult populations but more traditional student populations. What you know and can demonstrate, rather than seat time, is becoming a reality. Badging and other strategies and new assessment tools to measure student's knowledge are and will proliferate. Many of these services are offered by providers that are not institutions within academe and challenge many of the traditional concepts of higher education.
8. Recognition of credit (transfer, prior learning assessment, MOOC credit) will become common and problematic for many institutions. The recent announcement of a grant to the American Council on Education to assess the credit-worthiness of MOOCs has put this phenomena onto a more traditional academic path. Whatever the results of this effort, institutions can expect students to be appearing at Registrar's offices indicating they want credit from a MOOC course taken from a prestigious university. Indeed, this is already happening.
9. Alternative programs to reduce the cost of higher education are and will continue to emerge. Time is expense...and the push for accelerated learning strategies, many using e-learning methodologies, is growing as a mechanism for reducing the cost of attaining a degree. New and shorter pathways to degrees are and will continue to emerge.
10. The policy construct in higher education will continue (and needs) to change to recognize new learning approaches, increasing demands for accountability, the continuing focus on rewarding for degree completion, changes in federal and state financial aid, changes in accreditation, and the continuing shift to more work/skill-oriented degree programs that respond to workforce needs.

11. There is a continuing shift to more work/skill-oriented degree programs that respond to workforce needs, and delivered online and are offered in time-shortened and innovative pathways to degrees.
12. Finally, while our universities are not going away, how we conduct business at our universities, how we reach and teach our students, program structures and the dissemination of knowledge is changing. These transformations are underway in higher education—how institutions respond will be critical to the long-term success of many.

UNC enjoys a well-earned respect across the country, indeed globally, as one of America's pre-eminent public university systems. It leads or is often nested at the top of regional (Southern Regional Education Board) and national rankings as providing a high quality and affordable postsecondary education. UNC's e-learning efforts, with some institutional exceptions, fall short in comparison with other Southern states. In the latest data from SREB on the percentage of instruction delivered by e-learning (2009-2010), UNC's efforts fall below the middle of the 13 states reporting enrollment data. UNC's 7.9% trails Florida (16.6%), Maryland (14.4), Oklahoma (12.2), Tennessee (11.9), Arkansas (10.0), Alabama (8.8) and Kentucky (8.6%). In several of those states, major initiatives have been launched during the past five years to propel e-learning programming, a significant portion of the growth attributed to efforts targeting adults. It is worth noting that North Carolina's two-year colleges rank second (21.2%) in the same report, trailing only Kentucky (23.7). Despite those few bright 'lights' in the UNC system, e-learning has not had a major impact.

In large part, the lack of a focused, broad-based e-learning initiative in North Carolina has throttled its development. Several institutions have moved forward to establish significant e-learning programs, others have a limited scope of programming, and some have only used e-learning strategies in continuing education and non-credit programming. Further, there has been no system-wide effort to address the development of e-learning. As a result, many North Carolinians,

particularly adults in rural areas of the state, and not able to access higher education services. The nearly 1.2 million working age adults in the state with some college but no degree and another 500,000 holding an associates degree, a total representing almost 1/3 of the state's 25-64 year old residents, is a prime market that UNC can, and should, address. E-learning has proven to be a successful strategy in many states seeking to reach the adult degree-completion market, one that UNC's institutions could address with a more engaged e-learning focus.

One troublesome finding is the 'intrusion' of for profit online institutions into North Carolina to serve the large military population in the state. While a small number of UNC institutions provide programming for military personnel on bases or on campuses near military locations, the clear indication is that online programming is attracting significant numbers of students.

These are two examples of markets where students are seeking e-learning as the preferred option for delivery and where current efforts in the UNC are limited and not as competitive as they could be. And national trends suggest that the movement toward e-learning will continue unabated, indeed is likely to increase with the MOOC 'phenomena' helping raising awareness of the virtues of e-learning, albeit as a 'free' service at the moment.

The suggested actions that follow are designed to provide access through the "virtual doors" to thousands of North Carolinians who can benefit.

### Suggested Actions

The following actions are suggested for consideration by UNCGA leadership.

1. Within the UNC Strategic Plan, a strong and clear statement about the importance of e-learning as a central strategy in addressing the broader goals outlined in 'Our Time, Our Future' is critical. More specifically, this statement should define a vision for e-learning around several key principles that e-learning at UNC can:

- a. Be delivered with the quality expected of higher education services from UNC
  - b. Be a mainstream component to the traditional campus model, not a supplement to it
  - c. Be a viable tool that can help expand access for both traditional and 'non-traditional' students in North Carolina
  - d. Assist in increasing degree attainment for a variety of populations in the state, in particular adult learners and those where traditional campuses are not in proximity to their residence
  - e. Increase efficiencies across the entire university and at individual institutions by:
    - i. Increasing the capacity of institutions without increases in building and infrastructure
    - ii. Reducing program duplication
    - iii. Providing a larger number of student enrollment options with opportunities from across the university
  - f. Increase access points to the university
  - g. Strengthen the link between educational programming and state workforce needs, and
  - h. Create enhanced teaching and learning environments for both faculty and students.
2. A central and critical dimension to achieving success in e-learning is strong and effective leadership at the UNCGA level. The recent changes are a start. Articulating a clear vision for e-learning will help the new leadership in its efforts. Achieving success in several of the suggestions below will demand such leadership.
3. The quality and name recognition of the 'brand' of UNC is well established and a clear advantage the system and its institutions enjoy over many states and institutions. It provides a significant opportunity in building system-

wide e-learning efforts. At the same time, efforts to ensure the brand through e-learning is protected and retains and ensures the highest quality, is essential.

4. UNC should build on the strengths of several institutions within the University that have established strong e-learning programs and support structures. While some states or systems have opted to create new structures, even new e-learning 'institutions' or invited degree-granting third-party providers to offer e-learning programs, this can be accomplished through existing institutions under the UNC Online banner. A coordinated effort in this way will:
  - a. Maintain degree-granting authority within the existing institutions, ensuring that e-learning programs are not viewed as 'second class' degrees
  - b. Ensure no changes in the accredited status of institutions (with appropriate adjustments through SACS Commission on Colleges Substantive Change procedure for any new initiatives)
  - c. Allow current institutional activities to be maintained while new program strategies and e-learning activities are expanded.

While there were some suggestions during the interviews that a 17<sup>th</sup> higher education institution focusing on e-learning and designed to reach 'non-traditional' students (something akin to the University of Maryland University College) should be considered, that model would be prohibitively expensive, very time-consuming, redundant (unless current institutions offering e-learning were required to limit or reduce activities) and, most importantly, would lack the brand of current institutions and degree recognition. Strong central leadership with a defined vision and the impetus from e-learning being highlighted in the Strategic Plan will provide the necessary foundation for developing a successful coordinated statewide effort.

5. The number of high quality resources available at UNCGA that could be effectively utilized and deployed for e-learners is impressive, but there appears to be minimal linkage to these resources. A review leading to a greater integration, at a minimum providing 'bridges' to related services, but ultimately to a far greater integration, could be both cost effective and beneficial to many of these efforts and programs. In particular, CFNC.org and the vast array of academic resources and services available through that site, Reach NC, which can connect e-learners to workforce and economic development community, and UNC SERVES, focusing on the large military population in the state, could provide a powerful set of tools for e-learners. The UNC Online Test Proctoring and Mentoring efforts are exemplary and should be fully integrated into broader e-learning efforts under UNC Online.
6. New resources will be required as 'start-up' support for the e-learning initiative. This support should aid in expanding collaboration, incenting institutions to develop and/or expand e-learning programs and services, and in marketing/promoting the system efforts. A competitive small grants program can be an effective way to encourage institutional program development.
7. While e-learning efforts are institutionally-based and oriented, there are efficiencies that can be achieved through centralization of selected services that can both increase support and reduce redundancy. Efforts such as centralized marketing, selected student support services, some aspects of faculty training and data collection are some of the areas that can be coordinated from the UNCGA level. Leveraging system purchasing capabilities, licenses for services, and memberships can be cost effective.
8. Critical to the development of a vibrant e-learning initiative across the university is a coordinated plan to increase and ensure faculty have state-of-the-art skills in developing and delivering high quality e-learning courses.

Toward that end, the following elements of a university-wide faculty development initiative should be developed. and include:

- a. At a minimum, an initial mandatory introductory course on the basic elements of e-learning instruction should be made available all faculty prior to teaching their first e-learning course.
  - b. An array of courses or instructional development activities designed to meet the needs of faculty as they develop and deliver courses in the e-learning environment should be available.
  - c. Finally, a certification program that faculty can opt to participate in that would be recognized across the university and at individual institutions should be established. This certification should carry weight as part of the scholarship of teaching and learning at all institutions.
9. High quality e-learning courses and programs are not simply moving current campus-based courses into an online environment. Rather, a systematic process of course design or redesign and development is essential. This requires a commitment in advance of the delivery of the course. These developmental efforts are best done in teams with faculty (content experts), instructional designers, and assessment specialists working together supplemented by a robust technological infrastructure (which appears in place within the university).
10. The best e-learning course design that produces high quality learning can be blunted by inadequate support services designed to respond to the needs of e-learners. While there is no shortage of systems and support structures in place at UNCGA and its institutions, an assessment of the availability and applicability for students not in residence should be undertaken and appropriate adjustments made.
11. An early target 'market' of students for the expanded e-learning initiative with the university should be adults 25 and older with some college credit

but no degree or credential. In 2010, over 1.2 million adults, 23 percent of the state's adult population, fell into this category. Efforts across the South and the nation targeting returning adults have proven effective and most have employed e-learning strategies successfully. In undertaking such an effort, it is suggested that UNCGA;

- a. Develop a variety of e-learning programs, some from the current inventory and others developed by institutions designed to target the returning adult.
- b. Develop a university-wide program for competency-based learning that provides returning adults with the option of securing credit for competency. These 'booster' efforts have proven to be very attractive for returning students as a pathway to degree completion. The competencies should be defined by university faculty, can be offered in a variety of different strategies for undergraduate courses and should carry full recognition of credit in meeting degree requirements.
- c. Take full advantage of the state's articulation agreement with the community college system and ensure that credits earned via competency-based means are fully transferrable.
- d. Develop new degree programs and/or pathways to help returning adults have attractive options available to return to studies. These might include new baccalaureate programs, offering e-learning courses in condensed terms (five to eight weeks in length) and allow students to move through programs at their own pace.

12. A recent overhaul of the UNC Online website, the 'front door' to UNC's e-learning resources, now offers a more user-friendly and easily navigable site. 'Back end' changes and the migration of online test proctoring and mentoring services will provide easy access to those excellent services. A goal of the site should be to present helpful information to prospective e-learners about learning online, resources at the system level that can assist them in meeting

their learning needs, tools and strategies for success, access to services such as prior learning assessment, credit transfer, financial aid and other services which the student can access. UNC Online has untapped market potential and can be an umbrella for the system's e-learning efforts, particularly if further harmonizing with other sites can be achieved.

13. UNCGA should conduct a policy 'audit' of current policies and procedures to determine which, if any, pose impediments or barriers to e-learners. Generally, policies are developed around and for traditional students studying in traditional ways and are not supportive of learners who don't fit the traditional model. This should include current tuition policies and requirements for paying extra for online courses noted during interviews. Other policies on joint or inter-institutional degree programs, course sharing and other academic and programmatic policies need to be adjusted to reflect the commitment to and support of e-learning in the system.
14. E-learning has the potential to help qualified North Carolina high school students participate in college-level courses in dual enrollment programs. Expanding current 'Early College' efforts through e-learning options, working with the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics and its distance education efforts can be effectively marketed and help students and families across the state.
15. UNCGA should consider establishing a statewide Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) program as part of its broader e-learning strategy. PLA credits for working adults who can demonstrate competencies in selected subject area is growing in importance and student use. Establishing a statewide effort with faculty panels defining the competencies to be met and determining credit worthiness and recommendations for credit awards would be a valuable service. Developing policies that ensures those credits are fully articulated through existing credit transfer mechanisms should also be established.

16. UNCGA should consider developing a MOOC-like course focused on e-learning in the system, made available to all North Carolina residents with the objective of introducing them to learning in an online environment, highlighting programs and services available, and beginning an engagement with prospective students who may wish to pursue studies. Alternatively, or in addition, institutions might collaborate on an introductory level course that could be offered with a credit option (requiring an assessment component) as a 'loss leader' for perspective students.
17. As part of its e-learning strategy, UNCGA should consider developing, in selected programs, 'fast track' options that would provide condensed terms (5-8 weeks) and that would allow learners to move at their own pace through a program. This has proven to be a successful and very attractive program format for many e-learners. The movement of away from traditional semesters and time-based courses, particularly in the e-learning environment, is quickly emerging.
18. Efforts to develop e-learning programming to meet the needs of the growing minority population in the state are needed.
19. E-learning efforts at the graduate level should be loosely coordinated as part of the system-wide e-learning effort. The e-learning graduate market is extremely competitive, often reaches markets outside the state or region, and is often in niche disciplines.
20. UNC's e-learning efforts can have a regional, national and even global reach, but attention to non-North Carolina markets, particularly in the developmental phase of the work, should be limited. In adds a degree of difficulty to an already full agenda for work in the state.
21. While there is a close-knit group of institutional e-learning representatives, there is not a sense of community (yet) with that group. The September e-

learning planning session and meeting in October are good starting points, but this group should be providing support for and leadership at the institutions. UNCGA should formalize a advisory committee structure and work to have this group engaged and facilitating statewide efforts at their local institutions.

22. The relationship with the community college system and its e-learning efforts should be reviewed an areas for greater cooperation outlined and pursued. Linking e-learning programs that would allow a student to complete an associate's degree online and then to continue on to a 'companion' degree offered in the same format at a UNC institution, is attractive and marketable.

In the end, UNCGA's greatest challenge is to start a process that will alter the existing culture of colleges and universities and open for leadership and faculty, an awareness and appreciation for e-learning. The need to find the right balance between the needs of the public, the demands of students (particularly 'non-traditional' learners), the requirements of policymakers, the interest of our faculty and local academic communities, and breaking the quality, cost and access 'iron triangle' will not be easy. But with a strong and clear message of the importance of e-learning in the changing higher education landscape and a commitment to supporting the changes that are required, UNC can move successfully to developing a effective, efficient and high quality e-learning program.

'Our Time, Our Future' sets ambitious goals, many that a vibrant e-learning initiative can help leadership achieve. Whether seeking to respond to current and future workforce needs, serving more North Carolinians, including several underserved populations, maximizing efficiencies through the development of new learning tools and greater collaboration, helping to serve more students and in cost-effective ways, e-learning can contribute. Its time has come in the U.S. and for North Carolina.