March 21, 2022

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

NDSU *Ad hoc* Committee Charged with Evaluating Online and Hybrid Program Changes to Reduce Instructional Costs and Encourage Enrollment Growth

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In an October 2021 note to campus, President Bresciani wrote: "NDSU has historically used a residential, in person educational model. This should continue to be our model, but it should be supplemented by the creation of strategically selected fully online and hybrid degree programs. Not all students (particularly non-traditionally aged student populations) can easily fit into a residential model. We need to create high-quality online/hybrid programs that are in demand. This should include full degree programs as well as micro credentials and stackable degrees." An ad hoc committee of the above members was subsequently formed by Provost Fitzgerald to "explore additional online opportunities, evaluate barriers to online program growth at NDSU, and provide recommendations on online program feasibility and risks."

In addition to making recommendations that would support the campus in developing programs to meet new market demands, the committee was charged with exploring potential cost savings from delivering online and hybrid courses. The committee met several times to survey the current NDSU landscape, develop an Executive Summary, host an Open Forum Presentation, and ultimately deliver final recommendations by late Spring 2022.

Defining *Online* for NDSU

The committee's first task was to reach agreement on what we mean and what we think campus means by "online." Our definition of online is *any course or program that can guarantee students no need for physical interaction with NDSU's campus*. The actual content delivery could be asynchronous or synchronous, but the key point of distinction is that the student can be 100% remote. In this sense, online for the purposes of our analysis can be thought of as 100% distance education as well. In addition, the online "opportunity" as understood by the committee is at the program level, rather than individual courses.

Requirements to Go Online

With a clear definition, we discussed at length the obstacles and opportunities of developing online programs. The committee recognized that bringing some undergraduate programs online may be dependent on online availability of courses that satisfy general education requirements. The committee strongly agrees that significant institutional investment must be made to ensure quality of our programs as well as consistency in achievement of student learning outcomes between on-campus and online programs. The committee discussed the idea of NDSU contracting with an OPM (Online Program Management) company to assist with providing online programs but did not have a recommendation. The

committee also felt that some baseline training or support ought to be provided to ensure consistency in the student experience across programs. Finally, a clear landing page, such as **www.ndsu.edu/online**, was a common practice found at other universities, and we agreed must be part of further launching of online programs. Currently, students and faculty must search the NDSU website to locate online offerings; this issue may be suppressing potential student enrollment and creating confusion about offerings.

The committee also agreed that converting courses to an online format isn't always a simple process, and support for faculty via stipends or course relief ought to be provided when going online. One committee member interviewed several faculty members to identify common challenges that need to be overcome, including time to record lectures, managing testing and other types of assessment, developing interactive laboratory courses, and how teaching online sections is included within faculty workloads. In addition to instructional resources, sustained technological and staff investments were also seen as important components to going online. While faculty may be experts in their disciplines, not all of them are experts in effective practices for online teaching and learning. The committee recommends having Instructional Designers available to support instructors as they develop their online courses and programs. Additional support staff may be needed to adequately support consistency in quality across programs as demand for instructional design services increases.

Incentives for launching online programs were also discussed. A pathway for online programs must be developed that is transparent, driven by market demand, and allows for revenues from new programs to be partially reinvested in growing programs. Other institutions examined by the committee have "Global Campus" online operations with self-support funding models and revenue-sharing approaches between the program (College) and central administration. In the absence of clearly articulated financial incentives, the committee is concerned that online programs will be launched in areas with surplus faculty and/or in areas with low market demand rather than strategic building of programs likely to draw new student enrollment.

Role of HyFlex

Another consideration is the continued offering of HyFlex delivery of courses, which allows students the option to attend class face-to-face or remotely. The American Council on Education surveyed 244 college and university presidents and found that 41 percent plan to expand HyFlex learning offerings post pandemic, and another 40 percent are considering this expansion. In a survey of 2,266 students, Bay View Analytics found that 68 percent agreed that they are interested in taking some of their courses as a combination of in-person and online instruction post-pandemic. In a discussion paper, aimed at the Big Ten Academic Alliance institutions, *After the Pivot: Strategic Evolution of Online Education in the Research University*, the authors state:

> "If the local higher education institution does not provide the flexibility, program, or support students need, those seeking educational opportunities beyond place-based degree programs will be able to easily access these online from other high-quality, out-of-state (and, in some cases, other in-state) institutions." (p. 7)

There are important disadvantages that also must be considered. One significant disadvantage is the additional strain placed on instructors to facilitate learning for both in-person and online students simultaneously.

Recommendations

To reiterate our points of agreement, the committee developed the following recommendations:

1. New programs should be carefully considered in the context of prospective student and labor market demand and not be driven solely by which units have available resources to launch programs.
2. NDSU should develop a clear process to guide colleges and departments in their online program development. A coordinating committee could be created to outline procedures and to support academic units.
3. NDSU should encourage increased online availability of courses that satisfy general education requirements. Offering HyFlex versions of these courses may also satisfy the need for more availability.
4. A model for launching online programs should be developed centrally to ensure consistency in quality across programs and to reduce the "bootstrapping" aspects of program launches. Some market-viable programs will require new investment; others might be able to launch online from existing resources. The new market-viable entrants should be supported.
5. Faculty are strongly encouraged to partner with an Instructional Designer during online program and development. Instructional designers can share evidence-based strategies that promote active learning, engagement, and enhance learning to promote consistency and quality in online courses. Instructional design staffing should be commensurate with demand to meet faculty needs.
6. NDSU's ventures into online/hybrid should be supported with dedicated marketing funding and staff. Estimates of marketing costs range from $250-$600 investment per student recruited.
7. Online and hybrid programs must guarantee students the same quality experience as in-person. From an assurance of learning standpoint, moreover, all modalities of delivery must consistently meet/exceed various assessment metrics.
8. The committee does not see tremendous short-term cost savings from shifting courses online. If a faculty member teaches one section of a course in person and the same section online, the up-front costs of online are significant.
9. NDSU should maintain a clear inventory of online programs and courses and market online options through a dedicated *NDSU Online* website. Current online programs are not well known and may only be marketed at the department level. NDSU's current portfolio of online and hybrid courses is a hodgepodge of courses that are difficult to find, poorly coded, and not customer friendly.
10. Resources should specifically be designated for advising and student support services for online-only students, who have unique needs that need to be addressed.