

## Inter-Organizational Task Force on Online Learning

### Recommendations

### September 20, 2012

The Summit on the Future of Online Learning held in Chicago in September 2011 addressed many of the issues facing online learning in higher education today. An outcome of the Summit was a grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation to the University Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA) to convene an Inter-Organizational Task Force on Online Learning. The Task Force included representatives from the American Distance Education Consortium (ADEC), the Association of Continuing Higher Education (ACHE), EDUCAUSE, the Sloan Consortium (Sloan-C), UPCEA and the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies (WCET). These associations are deeply engaged in, and committed to, the development, delivery and support of high quality online education. The Task Force was charged to:

1. Develop a set of issues-oriented recommendations for the advancement of quality and scale in online learning (building on but not limited to the outcomes of the Summit in Chicago).
2. Develop recommendations that will help inform and be useful to the regulatory process.
3. Develop an inter-organizational mechanism for: a) rapid and longer-term *responses* to federal policy developments and media coverage of online learning; and b) a *proactive* agenda to help shape public policy and public opinion.

The Task Force wrestled with a profound dilemma facing American higher education and public policy: while education is the most important pathway to achieve both individual prosperity and national economic growth, traditional models of instruction have resulted in only a minority of the population holding a college degree of any level. We must deploy new strategies that dramatically expand the pipeline of degree attainment in order to reach our national goals and maintain the country's international competitiveness. Faced with limited resources for adding or expanding physical campus infrastructure, and demand for higher education rising much more rapidly than traditional place-bound learning can provide, online learning is the only strategy that has the potential to dramatically impact the critical issues that confront us. Through online learning our nation can address the very real issues of educational access, scale, cost, quality, and retention. Through online learning the nation can best meet the very real challenges of today's workforce and also prepare us for the challenges of tomorrow.

The Task Force recommendations are broad. These recommendations will be addressed through collaboration, cooperation and communication among the organizations represented on the Task Force, as well as those that may join us in the future. A working group will be formed to develop a communication plan, create a process for linking to policymakers and thought leaders, and, ultimately, a structure that will promote input and networking on a national level in online learning. Additional representation in the working group will be sought from the community colleges. The overall objective will be to bring clarity, reliable information, relevant research findings and realistic expectations to the process of shaping the future of online learning in higher education.

- 1. Create the capacity to better inform online learning policy-making and regulation by establishing a formal alliance of organizations dedicated to advancing online education**

Given the problematic results of well-intentioned regulatory initiatives requiring resource-intensive institutional responses, we must strive to help inform policy-makers and regulators at all levels. This requires collaborating with all levels of the “triad” of federal, state and regional regulators and accreditors on developing appropriate policies related to current practices and the potential of online learning. These bodies need access to well-informed opinions, reliable information and solid research findings upon which to make decisions. The Task Force recommends that organizations such as ours, representing the individuals and institutions most engaged in online learning development and delivery, form a national e-learning alliance of organizations working together to engage with policy-makers and regulatory bodies *as policies are being formed*. The goal of this alliance would be to provide valid information, dispel misleading or inaccurate assumptions, and facilitate dialogue between the online learning and policy-making/regulatory communities. In this way, we can work to ensure that the best interests of all stakeholders, especially students and the public at-large, are addressed in online education policy-making and regulation.

The following points highlight issues or themes that might form an initial agenda for the organizations and institutions collaborating in this respect.

- 2. Inform public policymakers and higher education leaders of the fundamental importance of online learning in serving the new “traditional” student: the adult learner**

It is by now axiomatic that the non-traditional student of the past has become the traditional student of today. The average age of college students rose to 25 in 2009. The NCES projects a 23 percent rise in enrollments of students age 25 and older by the end of this decade while those younger than 25 increase by only nine percent. This profound shift is not fully understood by many of those engaged in making public policy who completed college at a time prior to the development of the Internet and the full integration of current technologies in the teaching and learning process. That was a time when most of higher education was residential, serving students who were right out of high school. The majority of students now live, work, and learn differently. Given their needs for flexible access to high-quality, affordable learning options, they take classes that are technology-enhanced, blended, or fully online. While this approach and these students may be “non-traditional” as defined in the past, they now comprise the mainstream, driving the need for policies and regulations that reflect the present and future, not prior contexts and assumptions.

Recognizing this reality is critical to effectively regulating and supporting online learning moving forward. For example, the flexibility of online learning in terms of time and location challenges prior notions of learning assessment based on seat time. By necessity, the focus of assessment in higher education is increasingly shifting toward learning outcomes and how those relate to retention and completion. Only with a shared understanding of these shifts are we able to develop online learning policies and regulations that address the real issues in higher education and serve the needs of our society.

### **3. Make the connection between online learning, the economy, workforce development, and access, and communicate that connection to policymakers and higher education leaders**

We are confronted with a world facing long-term economic challenges. It will take a significant improvement in higher education attainment to cultivate a workforce that can serve as the foundation for long-term, broadly based economic prosperity. Online learning is widely adopted in business and industry; indeed, it has become the preferred delivery mode for “just-in-time” learning. Professional certificates, badges and other forms of alternative credentialing are increasingly valued by employees and employers as economical, innovative alternatives to traditional degrees. Anytime, anywhere access has made learning opportunities nearly ubiquitous. Solutions to perennial logistical challenges are now within our reach.

Online learning provides access to prospective learners across the country in urban, suburban, and rural areas at the time and place that works best for them. It reaches populations who might otherwise have limited, if any, opportunity to pursue higher education. And even for students taking classes on a physical campus, it expands the course offerings they have available to them, which accelerates their path to degree completion and the pursuit of career goals.

Still, this revolutionary nexus between online learning and economic growth and prosperity is usually not foremost in the minds of policy-makers as they try to weigh competing needs and priorities. It is incumbent on the higher education community to consistently and continuously “connect the dots,” thereby advancing understanding of and support for online learning as a key strategy in encouraging economic progress.

#### **4. Give presidents and provosts the information and tools they need to make online education a key strategic asset for financial sustainability and mission fulfillment**

The online learning environment is moving very rapidly with this year’s entry of top-tier universities in providing ambitious online programs. They join a diverse field of community colleges, regional public universities and for-profit ventures, serving distinct and overlapping student populations. Traditional colleges and universities now face an increasingly competitive environment. And yet, even under duress from ongoing budgetary pressures that threaten the traditional “core” of the institution, many higher education leaders have not fully considered how best to capitalize on e-learning to advance their institutions and more effectively serve the students of today.

In this rapidly-changing environment, senior administrators need a well-informed, strategic perspective on where and how online learning fits into their institution’s mission and strategic direction. We must help make the case that online education is instrumental to: enrollment and budget stabilization; expanding access to higher education for working adults, residents of rural areas and other underserved populations; and, more generally, forging a sustainable business model.

**5. Engage policymakers and other key stakeholders in conversations about new opportunities for innovation afforded by e-learning**

Technology advances at an ever-increasing rate; meanwhile, pedagogy evolves to take advantage of the new modalities enabled by technologies. Policymakers and educational administrators rarely have the time or resources to keep pace with the extraordinary rate of change in educational technology and e-learning.

Technology has enabled a broad continuum of options in the delivery of the curriculum. It is increasingly difficult to find a class that is not enhanced by technology at most colleges and universities. The college classes of today are far different – and in many ways, far better – than those of twenty-five years ago. Innovations include everything from simulations to virtual guest speakers to entire classes team-taught across institutional and geographic boundaries. The potential of e-learning to foster still greater interaction, engagement, and personalization is even more transformative.

Policymakers, those in the higher education community, students and prospective students, and the general public need a greater awareness of the technologies and infrastructures that enable these advanced practices and pedagogies. They need a map to help navigate the increasingly complex changes in the methods and modes of delivering higher education, and how those changes lead to progress in learning outcomes, college retention and completion, and other major higher education objectives.

**6. Use the overwhelming body of research demonstrating the quality of online learning to dispel the lingering skepticism of policymakers and the public at large**

Studies over the past two decades continue to demonstrate that online learning is as good as or superior to face-to-face learning. Indeed, online learning is often enhanced by the multimedia, globe-circling, and time-shifting capabilities of the Internet. We now know that the medium is robust, interactive, and accessible.

This message, however, has not effectively penetrated the consciousness of many who are not directly involved in teaching and learning online, or in administering and supporting online learning. We must find ways to help those who have not experienced quality online learning first-hand to fully understand the online learning revolution that has profoundly transformed the landscape of higher education.