

Developing eLearning Policies at the Department Level

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Abstract

This article focuses on key issues related to the development of departmental guidance documents that govern those who do or would teach online. Using one department's process and resulting policy statement as an example, the author examines the challenges and pitfalls facing departments as they develop eLearning policies.

Introduction

Institutions with eLearning offerings frequently post policies and guidelines for online instructors on their Web sites. An examination of twenty such guidance documents from a variety of colleges and universities (see Appendix A) reveals the following:

- Guidance documents are most frequently the published end product of committee work, or they are housed on the Web sites of support units such as educational technology departments or centers for teaching and learning.
- Guidance documents are most commonly either collections of resources and suggestions or official statements that have grown out of committee work.
- Guidance documents typically cover some or all of the following issues: course proposal and approval process, evaluation and assessment, expectations and requirements, and best practices. Some address enrollment caps, teaching loads, and legal issues.
- Guidance documents are based on university-wide standards and are not program or discipline specific.

The content of the documents studied suggests that most institutions see the need for cross-disciplinary standards for eLearning and believe in the importance of providing faculty who teach online with general guidelines and best practices information.

Despite the accessibility of such policies and guidelines, it is unclear how many of the *departments* that offer online courses have their own policy documents, and little public information exists about the process behind the creation of such guidance documents. In an effort to draw attention to the challenges associated with eLearning policy development, this article focuses on one department's decision-making process and resulting policy statement and argues that pressure to grow, justify, or regulate a department's eLearning offerings should lead to sustained, goal-oriented inquiry rather than unsustainable and problematic quick-fix policies. In order to shed light on the responsibilities and pitfalls facing departments as they develop and implement their own specific eLearning standards, it is necessary to turn a critical eye to both process and product.

Process and Product: A Case Study

At [Kennesaw State University](http://www.kennesaw.edu) (KSU)—a growing state university in Georgia with a 2005

enrollment of 18,556—a number of online courses in a variety of disciplines are offered each semester, and pressure to consider eLearning as one solution to the imminent space crunch has trickled down to the college and department level. In the [KSU English department](#), online sections of undergraduate general education and writing courses (e.g., First-Year Composition, Technical Writing, Computers and Writing, World Literature) are offered, and the author piloted the department's first online graduate course—Academic and Professional Editing—in the summer of 2006 in response to high student demand for online options. In fall 2006, the department will offer twenty-one fully online sections and three hybrid sections.

A summary of the series of events that led up to the KSU English department's actions regarding eLearning follows. In November of 2004, the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia honored another system institution, Georgia Perimeter College, with a best practices award for developing and implementing "a large-scale distance learning and faculty development initiative to teach a new type of class, the 'hybrid.'" This institution's "'Hybrid Fellowship Program' combine[d] traditional face-to-face classes with on-line learning, which reduce[d] the use of the College's classroom space by 50 percent" (Perry-Johnson, 2004). During the 2004-2005 academic year, the director of that program spoke about hybrids to a small, diverse group of faculty on the KSU campus. Several months after attending that meeting, the author began to hear talk about hybrids—along with other potential solutions—in conversations about projected enrollment growth and issues of classroom space and course sizes. By fall 2005, hybrid courses were appearing on the agendas of First-Year Composition program and English department leadership meetings at KSU. Beginning in January 2006, online teaching became a hotly debated subject in the department. Fears about a lack of pedagogical soundness and rigor—and about fully online courses following the much despised correspondence course model—led to the establishment of a listserv and then to a number of electronic and face-to-face discussions about online and hybrid courses.

Very early in the spring 2006 semester, discussions focused on hybrid courses—either as a way to increase and diversify online offerings or as a more pedagogically sound option than fully online courses (a controversial position that few supported). Two primary concerns kept hybrids in the forefront: First, the KSU campus is making the transition from WebCT CE to Vista in spring 2007, and fears of system crashes led to suggestions that hybrids might be a safer option (than fully online courses) until it is clear that the system server will be able to support the influx of new users. Second, it seems that some in the department viewed hybrids as a much better option than fully online courses because they give students face time with teachers. Having taught both online and hybrid courses, the author was charged by her chair with the task of compiling some information about hybrid courses and blended learning. A [report](#) was generated that defined hybrids and featured a review of literature that summarized potential advantages and disadvantages of blended learning.

Of course, a review of literature is only minimally useful. The best way to discover which pedagogical approaches and media mixes are most effective in a specific educational context and to make a decision about eLearning options would be to pilot new sections and study existing offerings. But planning a study and seeking support takes time that departments do not always have. In such a situation, is it better to say no to alternative delivery models until they can be researched in context, or should departments attempt to forge ahead armed with published research about eLearning on other campuses and anecdotal information from their own online instructors?

The latter option was taken in the case of the KSU English department. By February 2006, the focus shifted to policy development and away from debate about hybrids, in part due to (1) a lack of faculty interest in teaching blended courses and (2) continued student demand for fully online options. In February 2006, attention turned to completely online courses. The author was not asked to compile a review of research on completely online delivery, perhaps because the KSU

English department has been successfully offering online courses for a number of years now. The debates about online learning were both passionate and productive, though sometimes vitriolic. Points of contention included whether online pedagogy is sound and appropriately rigorous, whether faculty members should be able to teach all of their courses online, whether "traditional" first-year students should be allowed to take online courses, whether enrollment in online courses should be capped (either at or below caps for face-to-face sections of the same courses), and who should be "allowed" to teach online and hybrid courses.

A solution was needed so that the fall 2006 schedule could be finalized. A policy for instructors of both hybrid and online courses—one that addressed some, but not all, of the concerns mentioned above—grew out of listserv, e-mail, and face-to-face idea exchanges. Importantly, and problematically, much of the debate about this policy took place during departmental leadership committee meetings rather than whole department meetings. The author, one of the few tenure-track faculty members in the department with expertise in eLearning, attended and contributed to these meetings but was not a voting member of the committee. An instructor who teaches online also attended one of the leadership meetings and shared her experience with the committee.

Here is the policy that was approved by the English department's Program Advisory Committee on February 15, 2006:

Before volunteering for a hybrid/online course, please read the following list of conditions and be sure that you are willing to meet these conditions:

1. *You have previous multifunctional experience with WebCT (posting handouts, managing discussion boards and chat rooms, using multimedia, etc.) or experience with hybrid/online courses*
2. *You are willing to participate in a study (so that we can begin to assess our success with technology, with hopes that such research could be published)*
3. *You will attend and/or facilitate workshops*
4. *You will participate in mentoring (with an expert assisting a novice)*
5. *You agree to set up an administrator as a co-instructor (so in case of emergencies the administrator could post announcements to the online class)*
6. *You will develop an emergency plan in case of server problems, such as creating an alternative site on Nicenet.*

It should be noted that the author shares this information with not only the approval but also the full support of the department chair who was instrumental in establishing this policy.

As criterion one suggests, "previous multifunctional experience with WebCT" or "experience with hybrid/online courses" was deemed essential. This means that those who would like to teach online must first master the content management system used by the university as this is the toolbox for online teaching and learning. The examples—"posting handouts, managing discussion boards and chat rooms, using multimedia"—are meant to suggest that teachers must know more than how to upload documents. They should be able to take advantage of multiple modes of communication (e.g., text, sound, images) and thereby enrich course content and reach those with various learning styles (see Rice et al., 2005). They must also be able to make appropriate use of asynchronous and synchronous discussion tools. It is worth noting that Hiltz and Goldman (2005) suggest that "learning networks"—enabled by asynchronous conferencing tools like discussion boards—are what differentiate quality online education from "a computerized version of the 'correspondence' course [in which] there is no interaction among students, no 'class'" (p. 4). Thus, criterion one establishes what it is the department values about the pedagogical approaches of master online teachers.

Criterion two indicates that those who teach online or hybrid sections should be willing to participate in a future study. Of course, formal permission will be sought once the study has been formalized and approved by the Institutional Review Board. Thus, criterion two confirms the department's commitment to scholarly inquiry and assessment.

Criterion three suggests that, depending on the individual's level of experience, he or she will either attend or facilitate teaching with technology workshops for faculty. These workshops will focus on introducing new approaches to teaching, new ways of encouraging active learning and teamwork, new tools or ways of using familiar tools, and so forth. They will also emphasize the best practices in teaching and learning set forth in such documents as the [CCCC Position Statement on Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments](#) (2004). Citing Chickering and Ehrmann (1996), the CCCC position statement puts forth the following principles:

- a. Good Practice Encourages Contacts Between Student and Faculty
- b. Good Practice Develops Reciprocity and Cooperation Among Students
- c. Good Practice Uses Active Learning Technique
- d. Good Practice Gives Prompt Feedback
- e. Good Practice Emphasizes Time on Task
- f. Good Practice Communicates High Expectations
- g. Good Practice Respects Diverse Talents and Ways of Learning

The goal of the proposed professional development opportunities will be to assist faculty in becoming master online/hybrid teachers, and principles like these offer necessary guidance. Thus, criterion three makes good pedagogy, faculty support, and community building key priorities.

Criterion four establishes a required mentoring program that will pair experienced online instructors with those new to online/hybrid teaching. It is not clear at this point whether inexperienced faculty will be asked to shadow experienced online instructors before taking on online/hybrid courses or whether the mentoring will start once faculty members begin teaching their first online/hybrid courses. Regardless, criterion four builds on the priorities established by criterion three.

Finally, criteria five and six address very specific issues raised during department discussions. Criterion five was added in order to enable department administrators to assume control of a course and communicate with students in case of an emergency (WebCT CE allows faculty to add "co-designers"; a service ticket must be sent to tech support to accomplish this in WebCT Vista). And criterion six, which encourages the always necessary and intelligent practice of data backup, responds to concerns about potential outages and system crashes.

Policy Critique: Advantages and Disadvantages

There are several advantages to the policy described above. It demonstrates a commitment to high-quality educational practices and encourages faculty to work together to develop a set of discipline-specific best practices in online teaching and learning instead of forcing online/hybrid teachers to adhere to a prescriptive set of guidelines or follow specific, rigid models. If successful—and this will require a high level of faculty buy-in—the resulting collaborations will no doubt enhance teaching and learning as well as instructor and student satisfaction.

On the other hand, such a policy is quite problematic. A similar policy might work in a department with graduate teaching assistants, but requiring faculty to participate in mentoring and professional development programs may pose a significant challenge. How many workshops should faculty be required to attend or facilitate? Will non-participants lose their online teaching "privileges"? What will happen when demand for online/hybrid courses increases and/or

administrative pressure and space issues make it necessary to offer a certain number of eLearning sections per semester?

The policy raises a number of other questions. Who will coordinate these programs? Who will monitor or enforce participation? Will the committee or individuals who coordinate the programs be offered support in the form of course releases, reassigned time, or a student assistant? How will such work be viewed when these individuals go up for promotion and tenure?

Finally, what message is sent when it is suggested that online teachers should be treated as special cases? After all, those who teach face-to-face courses are assumed to be competent upon being hired and are not required to attend (or lead) technology or pedagogy workshops. What worries a number of faculty members, not all of them online teachers, is that such a policy establishes a double standard and places an unfair burden on those who do or would teach eLearning courses, especially considering how much time it takes to develop content for online courses and to respond to student writing (postings, essays, numerous e-mails, etc.). As a survey of online faculty at one university reveals, Web-based delivery requires "more time in both development and in weekly administrative duties than a similar course delivered face-to-face" (Distributed learning, n.d.). Colleagues and administrators may be unaware of this fact or indifferent to it. In the survey responses collected by Blakelock and Smith (2006), respondents repeatedly made reference to administrators' failure to recognize workload issues. The fact that most of the online instructors in the KSU English department are untenured junior faculty or non-tenure-track instructors further complicates the issue.

As it stands, the policy is incomplete and unsustainable. It is unlikely that the policy will be successful unless the issues described above are addressed and statements about evaluation, assessment, and intellectual property issues are added. Additionally, the reason for the document's creation and its intended purpose need to be more clearly articulated. If department leaders decide that rules and regulations are necessary to protect students and ensure high-quality teaching, then these leaders may be forced to take a hard look at the teaching and learning that is going on in all courses—online, hybrid, and face to face. Otherwise, departmental eLearning policies, though based on good intentions, may be viewed as nothing more than attempts to assuage fears and placate those who harbor suspicions based on erroneous assumptions.

Lessons Learned: Creating Effective Departmental Policies

A meta-survey document on the use of technologies in education provides a particularly apt summary of the current situation:

Historically and theoretically, the purpose of policy in educational environments has been to guide the adoption process; however, what we observe now is that innovation typically begins in the absence of any guiding policy, and policymakers find themselves in the position of scrambling to regain the leadership role. And they find that the policy development processes of the past, those based on careful, time consuming analysis, are a luxury that can no longer be afforded because the pace of change is so rapid. (Farrell, 2003, p. 9)

When classroom space limitations, faculty interest in eLearning, and student demand for online courses combine, the growth of online offerings may indeed occur rapidly and "in the absence of any guiding policy." The case presented in this article raises two key questions: First, how and by whom should departmental guidance documents and eLearning policies be created in response to this growth. Second, what issue should an effective policy statement cover?

Before discussing what might make a departmental eLearning policy effective, it is important to address the potential importance of such a document. This calls for a return to the issue of special cases. In reality, online teachers and learners *are* special cases; these populations do have specific and sometimes unique training, support, and technology needs. But it is a mistake for a department, motivated perhaps by suspicion and a lack of knowledge, to treat those who teach online as special cases subject to rules and regulations that appear punitive or remedial.

An appropriate eLearning policy should respond to the unique needs of online teachers and learners in a way that supports and protects faculty. Such a policy can be beneficial on a number of levels. For example, by making the department's position on online teaching clear, it can protect faculty at tenure and promotion time. Also, by formalizing standards, the policy can be used as leverage when training, support, or technology needs arise.

This policy development challenge calls for open discussion (perhaps by way of listserv), but it also requires an ad hoc committee composed of departmental leaders and faculty with eLearning expertise. Where should such a committee start? If an institution provides guidelines and/or a campus-wide eLearning policy statement, then the department should obviously begin by reviewing those documents and assessing departmental responsibilities as outlined in the documents. Beyond that, or in cases where no institution-wide policy exists,

1. The department should discuss its vision for eLearning and create statements about how online teaching will be valued and evaluated.
2. If possible, the development of a departmental eLearning policy should be preceded by, or at the very least coincide with, a pilot study of online courses or an assessment of current offerings. Departments should also attempt to assess students' interest in and experiences with online learning.
3. All faculty with eLearning experience should be consulted during the policy development process, and the process should be as transparent and open as possible.
4. Reviews of relevant disciplinary literature should be sought out or compiled, and model policies should be consulted and critiqued.
5. If they are the province of the department, decisions about enrollment caps, support for online course development, and prerequisites for teaching online should be made and added to the policy document.
6. Intellectual property issues should be addressed in the body of the policy document (see Petersen, 2003; Twigg, 2000; Ubell, 2001).

In order to be effective, departmental policies governing online teaching must be sustainable, tied to assessment efforts, and informed by available disciplinary research. Furthermore, guidance documents for faculty who teach online must include departmental position statements about the value of eLearning and how online teaching will be evaluated by the tenure and promotion committee.

King, Nugent, Russell, Eich, and Lacy (2000) provide a development framework that can assist departments in creating a robust policy: "The [\[Policy Analysis Framework\]](#) model identifies for decision makers essential, large policy areas (e.g., technical) as well as particular activities in each area (e.g., setup concerns)." This framework provides department eLearning committees with a tool to think with as they determine which issues their policy document should address in order to be truly useful.

Conclusion

Whether or not institutions provide faculty who teach online with standards and guidelines, departments are responsible for implementing appropriate guidelines and making policies that are

contextually relevant and appropriate. As one institution's online evaluation taskforce concluded, "ultimately departments should be responsible for the content and quality of online courses, with the advice and direction of [campus support units]" (Carver, n.d.). This is a challenging responsibility.

The case of the KSU English department is not offered to point out the folly of their efforts. In reality, the reasoning that informed this department's process was sound and some policy items are appropriately forward thinking. It does, however, illustrate what can happen when institutional pressures combine with administrative and faculty concerns to create a climate of crisis with regard to eLearning. Quick-fix departmental policies may do more harm than good if they are not tied to in-house research and if they are not flexible enough to be revisited and revised when assessment findings are available.

In response to her own department's situation, the author is currently laying the foundation for a project that will allow a small team of investigators to gather data from students, teachers, and administrators in an effort to understand the populations that are taking and teaching eLearning courses at KSU. This project will also allow the team to assess the strengths and weaknesses of current approaches to online and hybrid instruction. It is hoped that these assessment efforts, in conjunction with a larger-scale assurance of learning initiatives and the mentoring and professional development programs initiated by the department's current online/hybrid policy, will ensure that growth occurs in a direction that benefits both students and faculty. Eventually, these efforts will lead to the formation of an ad hoc committee and the revision of the current policy document.

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Appendix A: Sampling of eLearning Guidance Documents

	Institution	Document Title	Location	Topics
1	University of Missouri-Columbia	Teaching and Learning with Technology Faculty Guide [PDF]	Educational Technology	Planning, legal issues, content, community, assessment, evaluation
2	Mt. San Jacinto College	Guidelines for Online Instruction [PDF]	Educational Technology	Intellectual property rights, course enrollment, teaching loads, office hours, evaluation
3	University of Maryland University College	Expectations for Faculty Teaching Online Classes [PDF]	Center for Support of Instruction	Expectations for best practices
4	Long Beach City College	New Online Instructors at LBCC: Procedure and Instructions and Guidelines and Resources	Distance Learning Program	Required procedures, training, preparation, steps
5	Northwestern State University	Guidelines for Online Programs [PDF]	Electronic and Continuing Education	Standards, qualified faculty, institutional context, evaluation and assessment
6	University of New England, Australia	Principles of Online Teaching at UNE [PDF]	Records Management	Online teaching options, development, approval
7	Augsburg College	Online Courses Approval Guidelines [PDF]	E-Team Committee Page	Approval and evaluation
8	University of Central Florida	UCF Teaching Online	Course Development & Web Services	Required skills, getting started, resources
9	North Seattle Community College	Recommended Guidelines and Standards [PDF]	Distance Learning Office	Expectations, recommended elements, principles
10	Community College of Baltimore County	Guidelines for Faculty Teaching Online Courses	Professional Affairs Council	New course development, compensation, training, teaching load, enrollment
11	Minnesota State University	Guidelines for Online Course Development	Extended Learning	Design, evaluation and assessment, use of technology
12	Marshall University	Executive Policy Bulletin #13: E-Course Policy	Official University Policies	Approval, development, ownership, copyright, resources
13	SUNY Stony Brook	Guidelines for Undergraduate Online Instruction Courses and Submission of Proposals	Arts & Science Senate	Definitions, requirements, proposal form
14	Augusta Technical College	Distance Learning Policies and Procedures Manual [PDF]	E-Campus	Responsibilities, loads, class size, evaluation,
15	Bemidji State University	Online Course Policy [PDF]	eLearning Support	Definitions, guidelines
16	Hutchison Community College	Recommendations for Developing Online Courses	Center for Instructional Technology and Distance Education	Steps, proposals, faculty readiness, evaluation
17	Alabama State University	A System of Best Practices and Policies for the Development and Teaching of an Online Course [DOC]	Distance Education Committee	Expectations, guidelines for deans and department chairs, approval, evaluation
18	Middle Tennessee State University	Online Course Guidelines [DOC]	Continuing Education and Distance Learning	Planning, administration, course development, responsibilities
19	Kellogg Community College	Online Course Standards	Learning Technologies	Instructional, communication, assessment, and course maintenance standards
20	University of Findlay	Online Teaching Guidelines	Teaching, Learning, and Technology Center	Principles

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