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## Moving On: Distance Learning at the University of Kentucky

Randolph Hollingsworth

*University of Kentucky*, [dolph@uky.edu](mailto:dolph@uky.edu)

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# 2010

## Moving On: Distance Learning at the University of Kentucky



A White Paper for  
Provost Kumble R. Subbaswamy  
written in part by Eduventures, Inc.  
(as a work for hire)

March 2010

# A White Paper on Distance Learning at the University of Kentucky March, 2010

## Abstract

*This white paper summarizes the state of distance learning in U.S. higher education and contextualizes it within the distance learning here at the University of Kentucky. The goal is to offer the Provost at the University of Kentucky helpful context to support ongoing discussions about the future of distance learning at the University. Like many major universities, historically the University of Kentucky's approach to distance learning has been characterized by various, bottom-up initiatives across multiple delivery modes and colleges but with limited central direction. Across higher education as a whole, student demand, potential for quality innovation and faculty interest in forms of distance learning are not in question. More attention to forms of distance learning resonates strongly with the University of Kentucky's Strategic Plan. The University of Kentucky has an opportunity to build on existing distance learning activity toward a more coordinated and high-impact position, but must carefully explore and pursue the operational implications.*

## Table of Contents

I.	Context & Rationales .....	2
	Distance Learning at UK.....	2
	Potential of Enhanced Role for Distance Learning.....	2
	Scale of Distance Learning, including among UK's Peers .....	2
II.	Objectives & Options .....	2
III.	Next Steps: Setting Priorities.....	2

## Introduction

This white paper summarizes the state of distance learning in U.S. higher education and contextualizes it within the distance learning here at the University of Kentucky. The goal is to offer the Provost at the University of Kentucky helpful context to support ongoing discussions about the future of distance learning at the University.

## Context & Rationales

### (i) Distance Learning at University of Kentucky

Like many major universities, the University of Kentucky's approach to distance learning has been characterized by various, bottom-up initiatives across multiple delivery modes and colleges but with limited central direction. As noted in the "Observations & Recommendations from the Distance Learning Strategy Team" (January, 2008), at UK "there is no (nor has there been any) systematic, strategic planning with regards to distance learning. No areas of need have been identified, and there is no overarching map of how the University should proceed. As a result, program development or setting priorities has taken a backseat to reacting to individual interests."

This lack of strategic thinking about distance learning may account for the historical patterns of under-enrollment: distance learning at UK touches relatively few students. In Fall 2007, 91% of UK students took no distance learning classes, 6% took a mix of distance and "on campus" classes, and only 3% took all their classes through distance learning. By contrast, according to SLOAN-C, in Fall 2007 24% of all higher education students in the U.S. took at least one online class. In recent years, UK distance learning enrollments/sections have been largely flat, and no reports have been generated to ascertain how many UK students are being served by other providers of distance education. At present, no UK distance learning courses or programs are available through the Kentucky Virtual Campus or the Southern Regional Electronic Campus – nor are these clearinghouses emphasized by advisors as alternative sources for UK students seeking out the classes they need to graduate on time. This institutional reality may indicate that the University's central leadership has not constructed a strategic effort for outreach to new students via distance learning nor for consistently offering alternative means for UK students to find courses in time for graduation.

Distance learning at UK, whether supplementary for traditional students or alternative delivery for non-traditional students, is uneven by college and poorly chronicled across the University, and remains essentially peripheral to UK's center of gravity. A number of directly or indirectly-related central services and initiatives exist, such as The Distance Learning Programs' services in the Teaching and Academic Support Center (TASC), but UK's distance learning infrastructure continues to be characterized by limited status, resources and strategic direction. Against this background, more recent events bode well for the future of distance learning at the University.

Two years since the recommendations from the Distance Learning Strategy Team for increased coordination and a more strategic approach, some progress has been made. The Provost's incentive funding advisory committee, led by the Associate Provost for Academic Administration, will help to steer distance learning development through their consideration of funding requests from the colleges which must be based on a business plan showing how the new incentives would (a) improve student success, (b) reach new constituencies, and (c) maximize instructional efficiency. This is an

important step in acknowledging the reality of a shift from the older model of organizing the production of studio quality distance learning courses in a centralized, large-scale entity to a leaner, bottom-up design – a “maker economy” driver of change more in keeping with the nature of contemporary Internet culture and limited only by individual imagination.

Nonetheless, the strategic planning imperative persists as broader access to the Internet has changed how people learn. Does UK have in place a policy that can readily address emerging technologies or innovation? Does the University engage proactively in policies for supporting and holding accountable new systems of learning for UK students? Policies resilient enough to anticipate rapid changes in technology-immersed cultures and to support the inevitable transitions in systems of learning are those that typically are characterized by

- Flexibility
- Collaboration, and
- Transparency.

The University of Kentucky has an opportunity to build on existing distance learning activity towards a more coordinated and high-impact position. As this white paper outlines, student demand, potential for quality, innovation and faculty interest are not in question. However, given the poor evaluation of UK’s distance learning programs at the last SACS visit, careful attention needs to be paid to the quality assurance of existing activity and the development of any new initiatives.

## **(ii) Potential of Enhanced Role for Distance Learning**

“Distance learning” is used here to mean a formal educational process that uses instructional media to span the physical separation of student and faculty. SACS teams primarily review institutions and programs using in their analyses these key components:

1. computer-mediated classrooms (especially focusing on the quality of those where communications rely heavily on either audio/visual content or the written word instead of a good balance)
2. separation in time between faculty/student communications (differentiating in design between distance learning and correspondence courses)
3. availability of online students services and integration with the online teaching/learning environment

Of course, “distance learning” is not new, and even a traditional textbook may fit the definition of “instructional media that spans the physical separation of student and faculty.” Forms of correspondence education have a long history, and decades past saw universities and colleges invest in distance learning by radio, television, video and satellite. The present interest in more flexible distance learning reflects the growth of the Internet, which is now by far the dominant form of distance learning in higher education.

Since the “institution” presented in an Internet-based distance learning course is not anchored in a physical space or time for the distance learning student, the basic infrastructures of the University need to be examined and bolstered to accommodate the expectations of those living in a digital age. The following table adapts the well-known SLOAN-C typology of online learning:

Proportion of Content Delivered at a Distance	Type of Course	Typical Description
0%	Traditional	Course/program with no online technology used — content is delivered in writing or orally.
1 to 29%	Web Facilitated	Course/program that uses web-based technology to facilitate what is essentially a face-to-face course/program. Uses a course management system or web pages to post syllabus and assignments, for example.
30 to 79%	Blended/Hybrid	Course that blends online and face-to-face delivery. Substantial proportion of the content is delivered online, typically uses online discussions, and typically has some face-to-face meetings.
80+%	Online	A course/program where most or all of the content is delivered online. Typically have no face-to-face meetings.

**Source:** I. Elaine Allen and Jeff Seaman, *Online Nation: Five Years of Growth in Online Learning*, October 2007, <[http://www.sloan-c.org/publications/survey/pdf/online\\_nation.pdf](http://www.sloan-c.org/publications/survey/pdf/online_nation.pdf)>, p. 8.

Internet-based, or online distance learning, whether as supplement or alternative to the traditional classroom, promises much for higher education. Claims include:

- A richer instructional experience through access to otherwise inaccessible resources
- A more learner-centered, collaborative pedagogy, focused on outcomes over content
- A more egalitarian pedagogy, muting gender, ethnic and disability differences, and enabling less confident students to shine
- A more convenient and flexible delivery mode, better accommodating nontraditional students, work schedules and family responsibilities, as well as providing 24/7 access to certain resources
- Opportunity to automate aspects of instruction (e.g. grading) to free up faculty time, aid student learning, scale participation and lower core and peripheral costs
- Opportunity for greater consistency across instructional materials and approaches, focused on good practice while respecting academic autonomy

All these claims strongly resonate with major policy goals for higher education- growing participation overall, expanding access for nontraditional and under-represented students, improving learning and completion, accountability, and controlling costs. Online delivery continues to garner significant attention from institutional and government leaders.

Online higher education is also associated with claims about the tech savvy and learning preferences of the contemporary student. Contrasts with the past can be overdone, but it is undoubtedly true that today's generation of students, and tomorrow's, have had sustained and unprecedented multimedia exposure from a young age. This has certainly enabled novel settings for creativity, collaboration and informal learning, and risks a potentially problematic gap for formal higher education. At present, it is hard to pinpoint specific pedagogical benefits of particular multimedia

approaches, or to cite instances where student dissatisfaction or dropout may be attributed to outmoded instructional models. Measures of learning, engagement and quality strongly impact all formal and informal learning settings. The opportunity and challenge is to tap the energy and creativity of the likes of gaming and social media to enhance, where practical and appropriate, the instructional experience in higher education.

Given this potential, online higher education has attracted considerable hype and investment. One of the most respected resources in this effort is the SLOAN-C, a consortium of institutions and organizations committed to quality online education. This professional community shares techniques, strategies and practices in online education: these effective practices are organized into five “SLOAN-C pillars” – learning effectiveness, scale, access, faculty satisfaction and student satisfaction – with subcategories within each of them. Quality is placed at the center, both driving and the result of the strategic interplay of the five pillars. The work of the likes of Sloan-C and others, over many years, demonstrates that online learning can meet real need and high quality.



The recent US Department of Education’s meta-analysis of hundreds of studies about the efficacy and quality of online learning concluded that both fully and online hybrid delivery are consistent with high quality. In fact, the report shows that, overall, students in online learning situations perform somewhat better than those receiving face-to-face instruction (see “Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies” available online at [www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/tech/evidence-based-practices/finalreport.pdf](http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/tech/evidence-based-practices/finalreport.pdf)). Central to continuing this success is the ability to certify openly the quality of online courses and online components. UK is addressing this major hurdle with its membership and participation in the Kentucky consortium for Quality Matters, a nationally recognized, faculty-centered, peer review process ([www.qualitymatters.org](http://www.qualitymatters.org)). Alternative approaches to quality assurance and innovation include The National Center for Academic Transformation ([www.thencat.org](http://www.thencat.org)), which now has over 10 years of experience working with schools to redesign instruction to widen access, improve quality and reduce cost.

### **(iii) Scale of Contemporary Distance Learning, including among UK’s Peers**

In 2010, almost every higher education student in the United States has access to both formal and informal online resources, both for instructional and other purposes. Eighty-eight percent of public universities report central use of a course management system, and 58% of classes at public universities are reported to use such a system. Seventy-six percent of public universities have or are

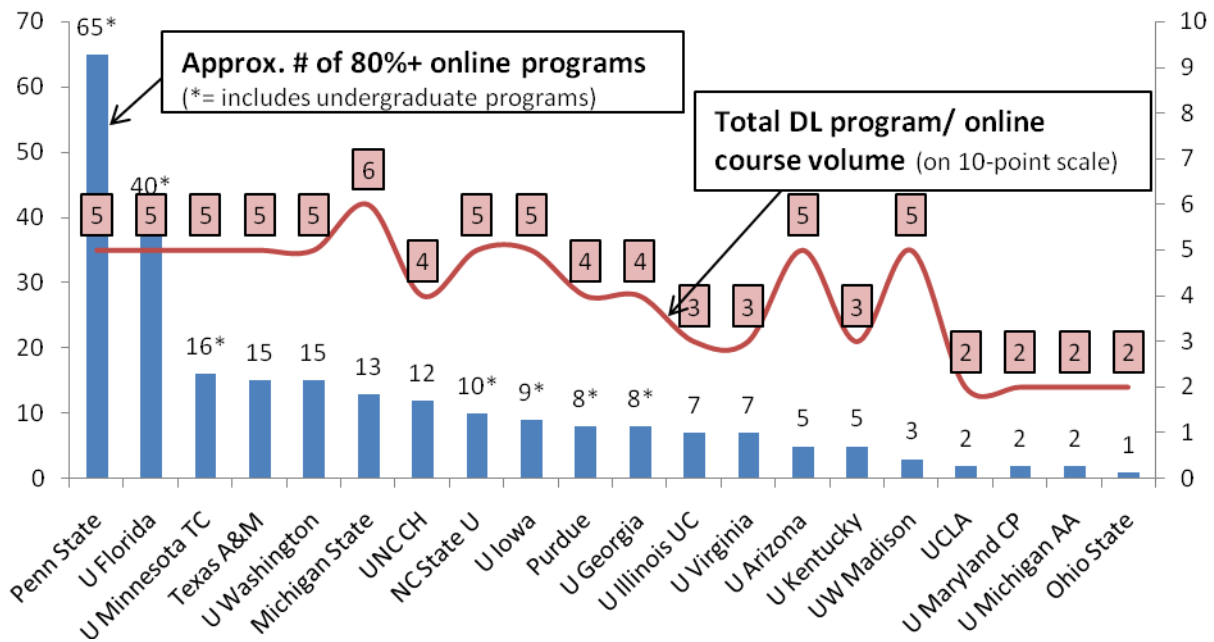
preparing a strategic plan for distance learning off-campus, and in Fall 2008 25% of students were taking at least on online course, up from 12% five years earlier.

Eduventures estimates that, in the fall semester of 2009, there were about 2.1 million online students in the kinds of programs where 80%+ course content is online -- tripling in five years. This total represents about 11% of headcount at degree-granting, Title IV eligible schools. More than one-third of public university faculty in the U.S. have taught an online course while more than one-half have recommended an online course to students, according to a study of administrative and faculty views regarding online learning released in 2009 by the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities-Sloan National Commission on Online Learning. Faculty skepticism about online delivery remains quite widespread, but is in retreat in the face of experience.

In Kentucky the number of enrolled students taking distance learning courses has steadily increased, and in Fall 2008 24% of full-time postsecondary students took only distance learning courses (did not enroll in courses on campus) - up from only 12% five years earlier. (*Source:* Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education Comprehensive Database, May 2009 WDC). Kentucky policymakers and community leaders still demand more distance learning in higher education.

Among University of Kentucky's peer schools, there is a spectrum of online activity, from quite developed to early stage, with the University of Kentucky toward the low end.

**Figure X. Distance Learning - University of Kentucky & Peer Schools - Dec 2009**



*Source:* School websites and Eduventures analysis

While UK is toward the low-end of the peer group in terms of online course/program activity, a significant minority of peers are lower on the spectrum, and few have highly



developed activity by volume. At the high end, online program volume at selected peers highlights that online delivery can play a much more prominent role than at UK to date.

## Objectives & Options

The University of Kentucky has remained relatively steady in the number of courses offered via distance learning, and averaging less than 10 students enrolled per course (*Source: Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education Comprehensive Database, May 2009 WDC*). This leaves the instructional and support costs for the University comparably very high. So, besides gaining efficiencies in instructional costs, what are some rationales for UK to pay greater strategic attention to distance learning and what might be the operational implications?

- Enhance the traditional student experience, and grow appeal to prospective traditional students, including under-represented groups
- Enhance scope and capacity for Summer and Winter Sessions
- Enhance UK's appeal to transfer students looking for flexible degree completion options
- Better enable flexible participation by international students
- Sustain and build adult enrollment at both undergraduate and graduate levels, serving both local and national markets, and generating new revenue
- Enhance non-degree and non-credit offerings
- Enhance UK's instructional approach and resources, driving appropriate consistency across programs and faculty, and building student engagement and attainment
- Lower development and delivery costs through systematic applications
- Free-up or make more efficient use of physical classroom space

Assuming there is UK community buy-in to some of all of the above rationales, many operational questions remain. Two key dynamics are: 1) centralization versus decentralization, and 2) in-house expertise and training versus outsourcing.

At most universities increasing attention to distance learning has centered on some kind of central unit with special responsibility for distance learning development and accountability. The role of the unit is to provide an enterprise-wide approach to distance learning development, providing technology, templates, resources and training, as well as specialist staff and guidance on regulation (e.g. ADA compliance, intellectual property). One indication of strength of institutional commitment to distance learning is mandatory training before faculty may teach online. Faculty training might focus on any course management system and related tools, instructional design, outcomes assessment and regulatory issues. The Distance Learning Toolkit and UK Blue2.0 self-paced tutorial from UK's TASC are examples of highly accessible training. These online modules offer a centralized window into the array of third party online instructional resources and tools, including open educational resources and open source applications, helping academic departments and individual faculty make informed choices. The central unit offers distance learning expertise less available to individual academic departments, while academic departments help the unit best appreciate student and faculty goals, needs and concerns within a departmental, college or cross-

college strategic plan. Institutional commitment to distance learning, if replicated at departmental level, requires both a willingness to cede some autonomy to centrally-driven good practice, and a focus on harnessing distance learning to address fundamental departmental challenges. Achieving a healthy balance between central and local influence is critical to success.

Funding models are also vital, seeking balance between central and local input and benefit. Special central funds can be a powerful motivation for academic departments to get more involved in distance learning, including specific compensation/release time for faculty to develop and deliver online courses, or develop technology-mediated curricula. Equally, funds must be allocated on a strategic, transparent basis, prioritizing proposals that relate directly to the UK Strategic Plan. The decision-making process must require evidence of long-term financial viability as a condition of funding. As distance learning activity becomes mainstream, the need for and value of special funding for incentivizing the teaching of online courses diminishes; however, the costs for a rigorous peer review (such as the nationally recognized Quality Matters program) and support for redesign remain. The role of the centralized unit could be critical in ascertaining University-wide efficiencies in cost for distance learning and describe annually how units and colleges met their planned outcomes.

Insofar as UK might wish to enhance significantly the scale and scope of its distance learning activity, then questions of expertise, structure and cultural “buy-in” are paramount. To achieve real change, revised policy and operational structures may be necessary and specific expertise needs to be brought in. Outsourcing associated with distance learning is concentrated primarily in platform hosting support, content providers, supplemental instruction, market research and marketing. Both specialist and more general vendors exist. Tutoring, platform hosting, content publishers, plagiarism detection and assessment services are used fairly routinely. Some institutions partner with firms such as Embanet and Compass Knowledge to support a school’s effort to move selected programs online and then market them, taking a share of revenue over a fixed period of years. Relying on outsourcing is sensible where in-house capacity is lacking or too expensive to develop. Outsourcing can mean quicker development time, but it can also risk lack of local buy-in and financial arrangements that are less attractive in the long-term. The central unit could serve as the point of negotiation for any outsourcing endeavors that gain enough leverage across colleges to need administrative oversight.

Another area for consideration is partnership with other academic institutions and consortia. Options include using the Kentucky Virtual Campus ([kyvc.org](http://kyvc.org)) or the Southern Regional Education Board’s Electronic Campus ([www.electroniccampus.org](http://www.electroniccampus.org)) to build distance learning alliances. These alliances might take the form of online-oriented 2+2 programs with local and other community colleges, or, course share alliances with in-state or peer schools to avoid duplication of effort and thus offering UK students a broader suite of offerings in order to graduate on time. The Open Education Resources movement is gaining maturity, especially given the high cost of textbooks and digital media production, and together with open courseware initiatives have begun to craft new possibilities in content production and delivery of online courses. An internal partnership question is how greater reliance on Internet-based distance learning activities might relate to future uses of existing branch campuses, those physical outreach centers around the state that have had longstanding satellite delivery services. To enhance student support, outreach centers could evolve to serve local online students on an as-needed basis, e.g., for proctored testing or facilitation of co-curricular group activities. They could also serve as sites for gathering distance learning faculty together to analyze and co-develop shared digital content.

Finally, the central unit can work with academic departments to evaluate the success of particular distance learning activities, whether in terms of recruitment, student experience, student outcomes, faculty feedback or cost to the department. As quality distance learning grows in maturity and the market grows ever-more crowded, both the central unit and academic departments need to monitor UK's peers (and competitors) to hone differentiation (e.g. specific target market by geography or student type, niche programming, distinct pedagogical model, specialized accreditation, etc.). As digital media and distance learning becomes mainstream, the implications for the institutional brand as a whole, and key physical assets, must be thoughtfully considered.

## Next Steps: Setting Priorities and Effecting Change

Based on the foregoing summary of the state of distance learning in higher education implications for UK, there are four key issues:

1. Assurance of quality and sustainability.
2. Using distance learning to attract and serve new students (vs. offering the needed courses in a variety of formats and times so that current students can graduate on time).
3. Decentralized vs. centralized models for services and support.
4. Determining a specific value-add for any central effort/agency devoted to distance learning at UK.

With these four issues in mind, the following next steps are recommended:

- **FIND UK'S MARKET NICHE:** Determine UK's positioning and differentiation by surveying prospective students (especially KCTCS online learners, businesses who would partner with UK, and UK alumnae/i) and current UK students to determine high impact points for strategic planning and decision-making – and relative to Kentucky's distance learning marketplace.
- **PRODUCE A COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGIC PLAN FOR DISTANCE LEARNING:** Clarify the role of distance learning (and faculty leadership) in each of the colleges' strategic planning, focusing on dedicated outcomes that are regularly updated and publicized. For any centralized distance learning support to be most appropriate and valued, the academic departments and programs should take a leadership role in motivating the high levels of faculty engagement requisite for quality distance learning programs at UK.
- **ASSURE QUALITY AND EFFICIENCIES IN SUPPORT AND DELIVERY:** Inventory enterprise- and unit-level technology needs and technical support strategies within programmatic contexts. Require all student support services to provide equitable access via online platforms (similar to the variety offered by UK Libraries services personnel), especially academic advising, undergraduate research mentoring, service learning, peer mentor training and support, disability resources, financial aid counseling, Career Center, and the Writing Center. Repurpose the current Distance Learning Programs unit and combine with Independent Study unit to support (a) market scanning for online programs and provider alliances and supporting the placement of marketing information in highly visible clearinghouses to achieve enrollment goals; (b) grant-writing and sponsored projects support; (c) administrative support of training certification, regular quality control by faculty peer groups, and intellectual property policies; and, (d) gathering and publicizing UK distance learning in relation to benchmarks and University strategic planning.