

REPORT OF A FOCUSED VISIT

TO

NORTH DAKOTA UNIVERSITY SYSTEM ONLINE

BISMARCK, NORTH DAKOTA

APRIL 5-6, 2004

FOR

THE HIGHER LEARNING COMMISSION

OF

THE NORTH CENTRAL ASSOCIATION

EVALUATION TEAM:

Dr. Susanne Darcy, Assistant Director for Operations & Student Services, University of Missouri, Center for Distance & Independent Study, 136 Clark Hall, Columbia, MO 65211

Mr. Jerald Gamer, Assistant Director of Information Technology, Hendrix College, 1600 Washington Avenue, Conway, Arkansas 72032

Mr. Gary Wheeler, Professor, American Studies and Art History, Miami University, 4200 East University Boulevard, Middletown, OH 45042 (CHAIR)

I. CONTEXT AND NATURE OF VISIT

- A. Purpose of visit.** The purpose of the evaluation visit involves two elements, provided as expectations in the last visit report, and one clarifying question, requested by the North Dakota University System Online (NDUSO) and its constituent members.
- i. Examine the assessment of general education as it relates to the offering of online degree programs by member institutions of NDUSO, particularly with respect to question of what might be the appropriate role in assessing general education by the individual institutions and by the NDUSO as a system.
 - ii. Evaluate the efficacy and efficiency of NDUSO as a system for offering online degree programs, to "...ensure that the citizens of North Dakota and the region are being well-served by this collaboration."
 - iii. Clarify, if possible, the uniform Statement of Affiliation language of each member institution as modified as a result of the last team's visit and recommendations.
- B. Accreditation status.** The North Dakota University System Online was established as a coordinating organization, whose focus is the support and oversight of collaboration of online educational services within the North Dakota University System governing higher education in the state of North Dakota. This system includes all eleven, public colleges and universities in the state, each of whom is separately accredited by the Higher Learning Commission. It is noted that because NDUSO is a coordinating organization rather than a degree-granting institution, the accreditation relationship with the Higher Learning Commission, with respect to online academic programs of NDUSO member institutions, is indirect. That is, NDUSO represents its member institutions in gaining accredited status for their participation in statewide, collaborative online educational programs. Member institutions may have separately accreditation status for online educational programs, in addition to those offered through the coordination and collaboration of NDUSO. It is this distinction that led several member institutions to request a clarification and modification of their current Statement of Affiliation Status Worksheet.
- i. **General education assessment.** The prior team reviewed the assessment plans of each of the eleven institutions and noted that while each is involved in assessing general education, it was unclear if any institution or other group (the NDUSO) was providing oversight of assessment in the broader online environment. The team suggested that this oversight would ensure that any differentiation and variability of the various institutional efforts and the impact on

students taking courses from multiple institutions would be incorporated in the overall assessment of general education for the benefit of online students. Accordingly, the focus visit was set to examine the progress and effectiveness of how NDUSO would address this issue.

- ii. **NDUSO effectiveness.** The NDUSO is a relatively new initiative of the North Dakota University System, having been approved by the State Board of Higher Education in April 2001. Building collaborative programming and effective processes for delivering online education was described by the prior team as being somewhat "fragile." Additionally, the team noted "... the collaborating institutions are at varying stages in the development of online courses and support systems...." As a result, the focus visit was established to evaluate the effectiveness of NDUSO in operating as a system for coordinating online educational delivery.

C. Institutional context. Since the last visit the NDUSO has continued to provide coordination and oversight of the collaborative educational programming offered by member institutions and has begun to effectively address relevant issues. The number of courses offered and the enrollment of students in them have increased over the past three years of operation. The two online programs in 2001 have grown to the current number of 53 online undergraduate and graduate degrees with a total number of students enrolled in excess of 7,000. Coordinating committees have been established to work on issues common to each of the eleven NDUSO colleges and universities. NDUSO has struggled with a variety of issues for the benefit of member institutions, including those related to statewide political, financial, operational, and educational problems affecting all member institutions.

With respect to addressing the elements related to this focus visit, NDUSO has represented its membership and their views. In particular, with respect to assessing general education, they have argued that because each student is assigned a home institution for purposes of receiving a degree, assessment is not a system function but a "home" campus responsibility.

D. Unique aspects of visit. In order to understand the experiences of students taking online courses through NDUSO and its member institutions, team members were provided guest access to six online courses. The NDUSO established a virtual resource room that was used extensively by team members prior to the onsite visit. The onsite visit was conducted using the same interactive video network system commonly used throughout the state, including for some distance education courses. This IVN system enabled the team to interview individuals at each of the eleven member institutions. Additionally, the

team exit interview was conducted and broadcast to all eleven, member institutions using the IVN system.

E. Interactions with institutional constituencies.

- i. Interim Chancellor, North Dakota University System, and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs
- ii. Director, NDUSO
- iii. Members of the NDUS Academic Affairs Council (11), consisting of the chief academic affairs officer for each of the NDUS institutions
- iv. Distance Education contacts (11) for each of the NDUS institutions (each holds different titles but similar responsibility for oversight of distance education programs for their institution)
- v. Business officers (4), representing different institutions
- vi. Financial Aid officers (5), representing different institutions
- vii. Student services officers (6), representing different institutions
- viii. Director of ODIN (statewide, library information services)
- ix. Faculty (14), representing nearly all of the member institutions
- x. Information technology representatives, including instructional designers (4)
- xi. Students (15), including online interviews

F. Principal documents, materials, and web pages reviewed.

- i. Team report of 2001 site visit.
- ii. NDUSO response to the 2001 site visit.
- iii. NDUSO website: <http://www.nduso.org/> with many links to member campuses, course catalogs, advisory committee minutes, and other documents related to NDUSO activities and committee decisionmaking.
- iv. NDUSO "virtual resource room:"
<http://www.nduso.org/nca.virtual.html>
- v. Six online courses offered by NDUSO institutions using three different learning management systems (Bismarck State College and eCollege™, Minot State University and WebCT™, and Valley City State University and Blackboard™).
- vi. *For background purposes only (mentioned as a model in NDUSO documents): the Michigan Community College Virtual Learning Collaborative: <http://www.mccvlc.org/>*
- vii. For background on NDUS history: Hart, S., Etemad, S., McCann, J., & Thigpen, D. (2002). The Roundtable on Higher Education: Creating a North Dakota University System for the 21st Century. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 26, 701-707.

II. AREA(S) OF FOCUS

A. Area of focus: (1) *General education assessment*

The 2001 team report noted several things about assessment from its visit that remained unresolved and prompted the focus visit:

1. A need to ensure quality outcomes for student learning in the online environment. From the team report: "...campuses were utilizing the same types of assessment measures for online as for courses taught on-campus..." without an examination of "...the possible differences between online courses and on-ground courses."
2. A concern about having a system for assessing student learning across the member institutions. According to the team report, because "...a student may take general education courses from more than one college or university..." the site team was unable to determine "...how the institutions would differentiate and analyze this multi-campus impact on student learning."

B. Statements of evidence:

1. Evidence that demonstrates adequate progress in the area of focus:

- i. Each of the NDUSO institutions has and uses assessment measures for general education. Each collects substantial data on student satisfaction, and is beginning to factor in the satisfaction issues for other institutional constituencies, including employers of graduates.
- ii. There is substantial evidence that individual institutions are using useful models for demonstrating student learning outcomes, including capstone courses, pre- and post-testing, multimedia portfolios and work portraits, and passage rates on professional examinations.
- iii. Nearly all institutional representatives indicated that their institution regarded student learning in courses as being substantially the same across all modes of delivery and regardless of the location of the student. Assessment measures were described as being the same for online and other courses, with additional questions added for online courses in order to extract issues particular to the online learning environment or experience.

2. Evidence that demonstrates further institutional attention is required in the area of focus:

- i. While individual institutions were able to demonstrate that they had long-standing commitments to assessing student learning outcomes, and are using this information to improve learning, it appears less clear that as a system there are shared commitments

and common definitions of the assessment of general education beyond the course level. There appears to be a broadly held assumption that the overall goals of general education (and its assessment) can be met by the completion (and assessment) of an accumulation of general education courses, whether taken at a single institution or many. In the judgment of the team, this model does not enable the individual institutions or NDUSO to effectively demonstrate that all students, especially the increasing number taking courses online at multiple member institutions, are provided the advantages of a coherent program of general education. This model does not appear to consider the impact on student learning the diversity of approaches offered by NDUSO member institutions.

- ii. While member institutions appear to have assessment activities taking place, and involving general education course-level outcomes, there is no evidence that the campuses or the NDUS system is examining whether student learning outcomes are affected by online course enrollments or by taking courses at multiple institutions. An important element of assessing student learning is examining the learning environment and using what is learned about how well students are learning to make improvements in the learning environment. Without assessing the potential impacts of the online environment or the impacts of students taking courses from multiple institutions, NDUSO and its member institutions will be unable to assure their various stakeholders, including students and the state of North Dakota, that effective learning is taking place.
- iii. Individual campuses and the leadership of NDUSO have suggested that, because each student is assigned a home campus for the purposes of degree source and primary site for student support services, the sole responsibility for the assessment of general education should be left to individual institutions as home campuses. The team's judgment is that this model, as currently implemented by the member institutions of NDUSO, does not leverage the power of system-wide guidelines and common principles for assessment that could be provided by NDUSO, nor does it effectively ensure that all students receive the benefits of a coherent program for general education.

3. Evidence that demonstrates further institutional attention and Commission follow-up is required in the area of focus:

— None noted. —

C. Recommendation of the Team:

Evidence sufficiently demonstrated; no Commission follow-up recommended.

A. Area of focus: (2) *Effectiveness of NDUSO as a collaborative system for supporting online degrees*

Context: While there is variance among the eleven, North Dakota institutions of publicly-supported higher education with respect to overall resources and deployment of online degree programs, each of the institutions face common challenges of increasing demand for technologically-supported distance education and declining populations of students graduating from the state's high schools. In order to provide effective and cost-efficient mechanisms for addressing these issues, the North Dakota State Board of Higher Education and member institutions established the NDUSO to serve as a coordinating system for the online delivery of educational programs. It is reasonable to expect that NDUSO to develop appropriate policies and services, acting as a statewide system in the interest of member institutions and the citizens of North Dakota.

B. Statements of evidence:

1. Evidence that demonstrates adequate progress in the area of focus:

- i. Individually and as a system, the NDUSO member institutions have effective committees, which meet regularly to ensure effective oversight of online course delivery. Examples of this cooperation include the development of a process to select and implement a common Learning Management System for online course support and management, developing and implementing common course numbering for general education courses, and the adoption of a common set of course requirements and student learning outcomes for general education. These elements demonstrate shared purpose and foster improved understanding of the impact of having individual campuses act as a system of higher education for the benefit of students and the state of North Dakota.

2. Evidence that demonstrates further institutional attention is required in the area of focus:

- i. While NDUSO member institutions and their students enjoy specific shared benefits of common access and coordination of online services and academic programs, the team noted that additional benefits could be derived from further development of system-wide actions, resources, and supportive processes.
 1. Establishing a common calendar for student registration activities such as adds/drops, for example, would decrease student confusion while improving communication across campuses.

2. There is evidence of an uneven distribution across the higher education system of financial and academic resources able to support online teaching and learning.
3. Little evidence was seen that suggests the NDUSO, as a system, celebrates the substantial successes of online learning taking place across the system's campuses. The team believes that without further work to advance the mission and supportive work of NDUSO as an effective system the growth and development of online degree programs will be hampered and be less effective.

3. Evidence that demonstrates further institutional attention and Commission follow-up is required in the area of focus:

— None noted. —

C. Recommendation of the Team.

Evidence sufficiently demonstrated; no Commission follow-up recommended.

III. AFFILIATION STATUS

A. SUMMARY OF COMMISSION REVIEW:

— No Change. —

B. NATURE OF ORGANIZATION;

1. Legal Status: — No Change. —

2. Degrees Awarded: — No Change. —

C. CONDITIONS OF AFFILIATION

3. Stipulations on Affiliation Status: The team recommends changes (see below) to clarify the SAS forms for each institution to reflect current practice as previously stipulated, with the addition of NDUSO facilitated online programs. Each institutional SAS would be reworded as recommended using the following language:

i. **Bismarck State College: (No Change)** *No prior Commission approval required for programs delivered online by Bismarck State College: AA in Criminal Justice, AAS in Power Plant Technology, Process Technology, Information Processing Specialist, Electric Power Technology and Electrical Transmission Systems Technology; and for online degree programs facilitated by North Dakota University System Online.*

ii. Dickinson State University

Degree programs offered online are limited to those facilitated by the North Dakota University System Online.

iii. Lake Region State College

Degree programs offered online are limited to those facilitated by the North Dakota University System Online.

iv. Mayville State University

Degree programs offered online are limited to those facilitated by the North Dakota University System Online.

v. Minot State University

Degree programs offered online are limited to those facilitated by the North Dakota University System Online.

vi. Minot State University-Bottineau

Degree programs offered online are limited to those facilitated by the North Dakota University System Online.

vii. North Dakota State College of Science (No change)

Degree programs delivered online are limited to the AAS in Health Information Technician, Office Administration, Business Management, Computer Information Systems, and Pharmacy Technician, and those facilitated by the North Dakota University System Online.

viii. North Dakota State University (No change)

Degree programs delivered online are limited to those facilitated by the North Dakota University System Online. All out-of-state offerings are limited to distance delivery.

ix. University of North Dakota (No change)

No prior Commission approval required to offer programs online.

x. Valley City State University

Degree programs offered online are limited to those facilitated by the North Dakota University System Online.

xi. Williston State College

Degree programs offered online are limited to those facilitated by the North Dakota University System Online.

4. Approval of Degree Sites; — No Change. —

5. Approval of Distance Education Degree: — No Change. —

6. Reports Required: None.

IV. CONSULTATION OF THE TEAM

OBSERVATIONS AND CONSULTATIONS OF THE TEAM REGARDING AREA(S) OF FOCUS

(1) Both areas of focus, the assessment of general education in the context of online and multi-campus programs and the evaluation of the effectiveness of NDUSO as a system for supporting online higher education degree programs in North Dakota, have a strong linkage to how the NDUSO and its member institutions define the mission and identity of NDUSO. As an outgrowth of the North Dakota University System, established by the North Dakota State Board of Higher Education, NDUSO appears well-positioned to leverage resources and knowledge about what works in online educational programs. Member institutions communicate and collaborate with each other to a high degree, demonstrated by the number of shared resources and coordinated processes observed.

In leading the statewide process from initial discussion, recommendation, and decision to support a single learning management system, for example, NDUSO has demonstrated vision and purpose consistent with operating as a system that works for the benefit of all member institutions and the state.

As the implementation of the NDUSO vision matures, additional opportunities for efficient and effective operations will present themselves. As issues arise, the question also will come up regarding how NDUSO (and its members) defines itself — as an active supporter of effective, collaborative online learning or as a resource for eleven (or more) differing implementations of online educational programming. Addressing this question of vision and identity, more completely than is now evident to the visiting team, will enable the North Dakota University System Online to define how it will develop more completely as a system.

(2) In the area of assessing student learning and to suggest ways in which NDUSO might be able to function more effectively as a system, the team provides the following observations:

A. As a system it would be appropriate for NDUSO to develop (in concert with its member institutions) specific guidelines and a model for the assessment of general education. In this model, NDUSO would provide examples of "best practice" and indicate several specific elements that, as a system, it would expect to have incorporated in the campus assessment plans for online delivery of courses, including general education. Each campus would be free to add elements to a core of expected components. By having such a core of assessment questions, practices, or policies, NDUSO would be able to collect data, analyze trends across institutions, and assist with systemwide improvements.

B. Each NDUSO member institution has assessment tools and processes in place, although there is considerable variability. Some rely solely on instruments that measure student satisfaction, while others include methods for assessing student-learning outcomes. Others incorporate measures for assessing quality teaching. Acting as an effective and proactive system, NDUSO might provide its members common assessment tools that could be used by each member institution in measuring learning outcomes. NDUSO could link additional faculty development activities to broad, systemwide, assessment tools and processes.

C. Although all eleven NDUSO institutions acknowledge that they use some form of educational assessment, NDUSO does not ask the campuses to publicize their results or plans for improving student learning. Acting as a system, and taking shared responsibility for improving online student learning, by requesting this kind of activity, would enable NDUSO to demonstrate effective oversight to its institutional stakeholders, legislators, and the citizens of North Dakota.

D. Current practice provides that any student pursuing a degree program elects a "home" campus. This designation requires the completion of a minimal number of credits from that campus, as few as 15 credit hours for an Associate's degree, 25% of the total number of required credits. In the online learning environment, having such a small number of required credits in order to establish a campus of the degree, provides a maximum of flexibility for students. A student in the online learning environment may take courses from any of the NDUSO, eleven institutions, applying these toward the required home campus percentage. In the team's judgment, the low percentage of required courses from a home campus may make it difficult for a student to feel connected to any institution, may inhibit programmatic coherency, and make it more likely that a student will not benefit from the support services of any campus. As a part of the overall general education assessment and other systemwide assessment activities, the NDUSO may wish to examine issues related to the percentage of required courses that students take. For example, what is the actual experience of students; do they tend to take all of their general education courses from a single institution? Do those students taking general education courses from multiple institutions gain a coherent sense of the goals and expectations of general education? Do they feel connected to the home campus? Asking and analyzing these kinds of questions would position NDUSO for making better informed decisions about improving the learning environment in the area of professional development, assessment policy, and the policies governing the required percentage of courses that students must take from a "home" campus.

(3) The implementation and usage of the statewide Interactive video system (IVN) is impressive. The system was deployed effectively across all member

Institutions. The team's interviews for the NDUSO visit heavily relied on the IVN system, and were conducted with minimal problems. This example of the infrastructure and its support mechanisms is exemplary of effective operations as a system.

(4) The NDUSO has focused on a single Learning Management System (LMS). Once in place each of the member institutions will be able to share a variety of resources—particularly in the area of learning objects. The team observed one element that may require attention: the NDUSO system would benefit if the selected LMS had built-in redundancy. In particular, redundancy would prevent a single point of failure and keep students on the system despite a single failure somewhere in the overall architecture of the system.

(5) While onsite and in the reading of source document, the team noted considerable discussion about the necessity of a 24/7 helpdesk for the LMS. Documents from BSC indicating the details of support calls for their LMS helpdesk (currently offering 24/7 support) were reviewed. These documents indicated that the issues for the fall semester where individuals requested follow up email support and those where individuals requested follow up phone support during the hours of 12:00AM and 7:00AM were 4% and 8%, respectively, of all such requests. This strongly suggests that the need for direct support during this time period is not aligned with the overall costs of a 24/7 helpdesk system.

(6) Several institutions within NDUSO have extensive experience with online course development and design; others are quite new to the online learning environment. The variability of experience suggests an opportunity for NDUSO to assist all institutions by continuing to encourage shared resources. Developing a mechanism for collaborative faculty development and for sharing instructional design information and expertise would enable NDUSO to demonstrate its commitment to coordinating the ongoing development of the online learning environment.

(7) Among the issues that would benefit NDUSO and its member institutions as topics for ongoing professional development are the following:

- Discussing the topics of intellectual property rights and copyright issues in the online learning environment would enable faculty and others to develop learning objects and other materials with a greater knowledge of the broader issues involved.
- Developing and providing more explicit information about which courses are available for enrollment at all institutions, both for a specific academic term but also for longer periods (program-long) would help students plan effectively and proceed through their degree programs.
- Developing online processes and systems for effective self-paced tutoring or other knowledge-based systems would enable students and others to progress more effectively through their learning programs.

- Providing additional opportunities for the faculty from each of the institutions for online and face-to-face dialog would help build greater inter-institutional understanding and help support the online learning environment.