An e-Learning Policy: The AUP of Electronic Learning

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Abstract
Electronic learning (e-learning) policies provide stability and accountability for electronic learning programs. In order to assure quality in electronic learning programs, regulations governing such programs should exceed rudimentary expectations. This paper presents (1) the need for and (2) techniques for the design and implementation of an electronic learning policy on a university campus to provide a controlled and cohesive electronic learning program. Furthermore, the paper will suggest policy components and present resources for electronic and distance learning in higher education.

Purpose, Rationale, and Implications of “Policy”
For some time, the connotation surrounding “policy” has been negative. Addressing an issue of policy in some circles would lead the individuals present to cringe. Professionals often feel restricted because of policy. They sometimes feel as though their professional autonomy is abridged by policy. Regardless, policy is often necessary in education despite the reaction it receives from educators.

Universities implement policies for all functions of the institution from facilities management to financial aid to grade reporting, and the expectations and guidelines for electronic learning are often encapsulated within these guidelines. Some institutions’ academic regulations that include electronic learning may be appropriate and sufficient; however, a policy that stands alone demonstrates a formidable status that is not apparent otherwise. Electronic learning policies should hold such a position because of the dominant and ubiquitous presence of electronically delivered courses in today’s postsecondary education.

The nature of electronic learning does not lend itself to straightforward management. The dispersion of learners and faculty creates a complicated system of checks and balances for which the university’s administration is responsible. Nevertheless, quality assurance is a tenet of education, and electronic education should not be exempt from such evaluation.

An effort of this nature should not be unilateral. A committee that is representative of all academic units (i.e., electronic learning, faculty, information technology, library, and student support) should be convened to construct the policy.

Components of the Policy

Terms and Definitions
Current research in all types of electronically-mediated learning in which the instructor and the students are separated reveals a vernacular dispute that grows with each contributing author. An electronic learning policy should explicate the terms that describe its electronic learning program. The following terms of interest are offered for consideration:

- Electronic learning
- Electronic education
- Distance learning
- Distance education
- Distributed learning
- Distributed education
A policy should define how the institution regards these terms, and all individuals involved with the electronic learning program should “talk the same talk” when promoting and implementing the program so that prospective students are not bewildered by vernacular disparities.

Mission and Goals
Compose an affirmative statement of scope that sets a tone for the program. Compliment this statement with attainable goals and measurable objectives for the program. Include this statement in the policy so that it is communicated appropriately throughout the university and to its constituents.

Procedures
A “procedures” section in the policy is imperative to the organization and implementation of an electronic learning program. This section presents the program’s framework and outlines the responsibilities of each individual and university unit involved. The electronic learning staff should be involved if not responsible for the entire process and be prepared to serve as liaisons among university units.

Scheduling traditional courses requires the cooperation of at least two units: the academic department and the registrar’s office. Electronic course scheduling should involve at least one additional unit: the electronic learning office. The policy must stipulate this specifically to prohibit scheduling an ill-prepared course with an ill-prepared instructor. The electronic learning staff should be aware of all courses that academic departments wish to offer through electronic means so that they may work to ensure the quality of those courses and the preparedness of the instructor. This is quite often the most delicate stage of the process as it requires one or more individuals to share control of his or her duties with others.

Other individuals whose duties should be outlined are the information technology director (or designee) and the library director (or designee). Information technology personnel should consider how the university’s technical and media services can be extended to remote students. Likewise, the library personnel should devise a process for availing remote students of the same or equal services provided to those local students.

Course and Content Design
Placing an unqualified individual in a position for which he or she has no preparation is detrimental to the individual and to the organization. Teaching is no exception. An evident trend in higher education is to provide faculty status to individuals whose academic credentials are in their respective disciplines but not necessarily in the discipline of education. Expertise in an academic discipline does not bestow exceptional teaching ability upon an individual. Likewise, a quality instructor of traditional courses does not yield a quality instructor of electronic courses by default. Conversely, some weary traditional course instructors prove to be stellar electronic course instructors. A systematic training process alleviates the majority of complications that will arise from this predicament.

Training, mentoring, and ongoing technical and instructional support sustain an institution’s academic integrity and the reception of an electronic learning program. The support and confidence in a program will wane with the diminishing of continuous support for faculty and students. A policy should outline provisions for training, mentoring, and supporting faculty and student progression through electronic learning initiatives.

Resistance to a mandated course template may surface from faculty. Mandating a given template for courses, while expeditious and advantageous for management purpose, denies an instructor the privilege of customizing the learning experience for his or her students. Providing a model from which faculty can draw ideas and working individually with faculty to design content and structure courses prove to be much more effective. This approach also helps faculty become aware of alternative assessment strategies, fair use and copyright laws, and innovative grading procedures.
**Logistics**

Aside from the content and pedagogical considerations related to electronic learning programs, a number of logistical complexities exist. Logistical complexities usually present themselves when face-to-face (i.e., videoconferencing and compressed video) sessions are held. These, too, should be stipulated in the policy.

A course that meets in real-time with a number of instructional sites requires a great deal of classroom management planning in addition to the instructional planning. Complications can be avoided if the policy addresses topics such as remote site proctoring, exam administration, assignment submission, videotape recording of sessions, student participation procedures, and the like.

Scheduling priorities for videoconferencing and compressed video facilities must also be described definitively in the policy. The priorities may be somewhat similar to:

- **PRIORITY 1:** Academic course of the university either broadcasted from the campus or another instructional site
- **PRIORITY 2:** Meeting, seminar, or the like sponsored by the university or involving university personnel
- **PRIORITY 3:** Academic course broadcasted from another university to serve personnel at receiving university (costs are incurred by broadcasting university and remitted to receiving site)
- **PRIORITY 4:** Meeting, seminar, or the like sponsored by another university or institution to serve personnel at receiving university (costs are incurred by sponsoring entity and remitted to receiving site)
- **PRIORITY 5:** Meeting, seminar, or the like requested by external entity or person not affiliated with university (costs are incurred by sponsoring entity or entity requesting facility use and remitted to receiving site)

**Evaluation**

The evaluation division of the policy should address all aspects of evaluation related to the electronic learning program. That is, it should specify the process for submitting, reviewing, and approving proposed electronic courses prior to the semester in which they will be offered. The evaluation, like the construction of the policy, should be facilitated through an electronic learning committee in collaboration with the faculty member proposing the course and his or her academic supervisor. Additionally, the policy should either require or strongly encourage students to avail themselves of online readiness assessments that provide them with prompt feedback on their projected success in electronic courses (primarily used for online courses as other electronic courses are face-to-face and offered in real-time).

Student course evaluations, per university regulations, should be administered to students in electronic courses just as they are administered to students in traditional courses. Secure, online evaluations with user authentication provisions should be available to online students; postal mail may be used in lieu of this if an online evaluation system is not available.

Program evaluations are invaluable to the success of an electronic learning program. Currently, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) is developing an electronic learning program evaluation focused upon measurable standards similar to those of regional accrediting agencies. Northwestern State University (Natchitoches, LA) has piloted this program evaluation, and the succeeding report should be disseminated later this year.

**Conclusion**

Further investigation into electronic learning policies may reveal more detailed or in some cases contrasting views from those expressed in this paper. The goal of this paper was to provide electronic learning professionals with the results of one institution’s efforts to improve its electronic learning program. Policies do not always conform to a “one size fits all” philosophy. The ideas presented in this paper should be examined, and electronic
learning professionals should consider how these concepts align with their respective institution’s goals and objectives for electronic learning. Some may find that these ideas complement those of other institutions; some may find that these ideas provide a foundation from which they may be augmented. In both respects, the author’s goal was to assist other electronic learning professionals in improving the service provided to students and faculty.

**Resources and Points of Reference**


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