Academic Affairs Division
Distance Education Strategic Plan

2018-2021

The College of Charleston has been marked for generations by its commitment to relatively small course sections and to face-to-face, personalized instruction. For many years to come, the great majority of our future instructional effort will continue to be organized around direct, real-time contact between faculty and undergraduate students. In offering additional distance education course sections and in adopting a more intentional approach to distance course development and scheduling, the current Distance Education Strategic Plan recognizes the importance of giving students new options and opportunities and, in some cases, the ability to acquire new competencies when face-to-face options are not available, desirable, or practical.

Background

The College of Charleston has had steady growth in its undergraduate and graduate distance education offerings since 2012. The current document is the first-ever divisional strategic plan on distance education.[1] The plan is consistent with the College of Charleston Strategic Plan and provides guidance for the work of the various units of the Academic Affairs Division, including the interactions of Academic Affairs units with the offices and units of the College of Charleston located outside the Academic Affairs Division (e.g., Division of Information Technology). The current plan amends the divisional strategic plan but shall be maintained separately from it. The primary emphasis of the current divisional plan will be on online courses, where the majority or entirety of the instruction is offered at a distance.

From 2012 to the present, the College of Charleston has made significant strides in the development of online course options for our students. While our growing summer online offerings have been widely noted in recent years, a record 3.8% of our undergraduate course sections in the 2017 Fall Semester were offered entirely at a distance. Further, by Spring 2018 about 275 current College of Charleston faculty have completed the Distance Education (DE) Readiness Course. A significant number of our students are choosing to take one or more courses

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[1] The College of Charleston Strategic Plan, as most recently revised in February 2013, calls for the growth and development of online courses and programs for both undergraduates and graduates. See the College's strategic plan at 1.10, 2.4, and 9.4. The text of the College's plan is available at http://www.cofc.edu/strategicplan/documents/strategic-plan.pdf. The current divisional plan is intended to provide more specific goals and timetables for achieving the strategies and tactics of the institutional plan, as previously approved by the College of Charleston Board of Trustees. The current divisional plan also is consistent with the report of the *ad hoc* Distance and Online Education Task Force, dated December 14, 2012.

online during their time at the College. Resources relevant to our current distance education efforts, including our divisional Policy on Distance Education, are available at http://academicaffairs.cofc.edu/distance-education/index.php.

From 2010-2018, we largely relied on the interest of faculty to determine who would volunteer to take the DE Readiness Course and, as a result, what courses and course sections would and would not be offered entirely at a distance. This invitational approach to securing faculty support for distance modalities worked well in many ways, but the result was the creation of a relatively eclectic list of lower- and upper-division undergraduate courses offered at a distance, where those offerings are not aligned in any intentional way with the greatest undergraduate student needs. Further, we did not ensure the scheduling of certain high-demand distance course sections during the fall and spring semesters, even if such distance course sections had been taught for multiple years during the summer terms.

The Distance Education Strategic Plan is intended to identify clear goals and guide the work of the Academic Affairs Division in the development of new and improved distance education capacities and opportunities over the next three academic years, concluding June 30, 2021.

The College's current institutional strategic plan calls for the expansion of distance education options for students. The divisional plan is intended to be consistent with that plan, which was adopted nearly a decade ago following extensive faculty consultation and input. In short, this divisional plan announces no change in the direction or priorities of the College, in light of commitments previously made through our system of shared governance.

The current divisional plan is not motivated by any specific financial goal, but with the intention of providing additional distance education courses, in light of strong undergraduate student demand, the development of new online graduate offerings, and the previous approval at all levels of the Bachelor of General Studies. The existing Bachelor of General Studies program in particular requires some expansion in distance education offerings if the program is to be supported in a fashion that is consistent with the approved proposal. Also, consistent with the findings of the *ad hoc* Distance and Online Education Task Force, dated December 14, 2012, a well-designed approach to distance education will enhance and add to our historic emphasis on relatively small course sections and personalized instruction. The current divisional plan does not signal any desire to increase individual course section enrollment limits.

Components of the Plan

The Distance Education Strategic Plan for the Academic Affairs Division for the relevant three-year period will have five primary components, all of which will be assessed annually in accordance with the College's then-current procedures for academic and administrative assessment:

1. *We will continue to serve all faculty who want to pursue professional development with technology-assisted instruction.* Any faculty colleague who wishes to volunteer to develop new

technology skills by taking the DE Readiness Course will be welcome to do so.[2] The availability of the course will continue to serve as a major professional-development opportunity for College of Charleston roster and adjunct faculty. Adjustments will be made, to the best of our ability, to provide course access if demand for course enrollment exceeds availability. As has previously been the case, DE Readiness Course enrollments and completions will be part of our approach to the assessment for DE. Enhancements to the DE Readiness Course will be discussed as appropriate with the leadership of the Division of Information Technology.

2. *We will pursue intentional course development for key faculty and scheduling for high-demand distance courses for undergraduates.* Specifically, beginning in 2019-2020, our goal will be to offer at least one distance-education course section of each "top 25" course for undergraduate enrollments during each regular academic year (fall and/or spring semester). Additional distance education course sections for these highest-demand courses may well be appropriate in each academic year. In cases where a top 25 course (or lab) cannot be developed for distance offerings by 2019-2010, the development of new courses that would meet the same general education or other degree requirements will be considered.

   Beginning in 2020-2021, our goal will be to offer at least one distance-education course section of each "top 40" course for undergraduate enrollments during each regular academic year (fall and/or spring semester).[3]

   Exceptions will be made, relative to these goals, when faculty experts in the relevant discipline conclude that a specific course cannot be delivered at a distance in a fashion consistent with our institutional requirements for instructional quality. In certain cases, the Office of the Provost may entertain proposals to engage faculty from other institutions as instructional experts and consultants on the development of high-priority online courses.

   A list of high-enrollment courses in recent semesters was previously developed and distributed to academic leaders in December 2017, complete with information about the availability of these courses in distance formats.[4] Certain high-enrollment courses already are taught at a distance with some regularity in fall and/or spring semesters, at least in the most recent semesters. Others are taught at a distance only in summer sessions. Still other courses have not yet been developed for offering at a distance, though plans may already exist for doing so in some cases.

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[2] The role of the DE Readiness Course is described in the Divisional Policy on Distance Education. See http://academicaffairs.cofc.edu/documents/procedures-and-practices/Distance_Ed_Policy.pdf.
[3] In certain cases, the timetable for initiating distance offerings might be accelerated or delayed based on the relationship of a course to a related laboratory course or to a prerequisite or successor course. In other cases, the timetable for initiating distance offerings might be accelerated or delayed based on the availability of qualified, willing, and suitable faculty for such assignments.
[4] Jim Posey of IRPIM created this list. Doug Ferguson, Distance Education Coordinator, consulted on its development.

Based on the available evidence, we know that distance education offerings are quite popular even with our traditionally aged, full-time undergraduate students. Our present distance sections during the fall and spring semesters are too inconsistently programmed, however, for us to have a complete understanding of the extent of distance demand for those semesters. Further, in light of the Faculty Senate and Board of Trustees votes to create the new Bachelor of General Studies (BGS), we are obligated to pursue distance programming that will meet the needs of future BGS students and the scheduling preferences of our students. Adjustments to our current distance model are required to meet these needs.

3. *By January 2020, at least 300 then-current College of Charleston faculty will have completed the DE Readiness Course.* Our recent experience with faculty demand for training suggests this goal is attainable and will allow us to have a College of Charleston faculty, including adjunct faculty, where approximately 40% of those with instructional duties will have completed the readiness course. This level of faculty expertise should be sufficient to staff the course sections needed to facilitate the growth of distance-education options for 2021 and beyond. It would be highly desirable if the goal of 300 trained faculty were significantly exceeded by the conclusion of the divisional plan in 2021.

4. *By 2020-2021, 6% or more of our undergraduate course lecture sections during the regular academic year (i.e., fall and spring semesters) would be scheduled as distance-education course sections.* This increase in distance-education course availability will create a critical mass of course offerings in support of the Bachelor of General Studies degree and will help us to gauge the level of demand for undergraduate DE courses when a more comprehensive list of DE offerings is available for student enrollment during the regular year. With the implementation of the Charleston Bridge Program and the recent enrollment fluctuations of the College, a percentage goal is more appropriate for the strategic plan than a goal for a specific number of DC course sections.

5. *The faculty and academic administration of the College of Charleston will study the eventual adoption of a distance-education course requirement for many or all College of Charleston undergraduates.* There may be or may not be merit to requiring future College of Charleston undergraduate students to complete one or more distance-education courses during their time at the College. The goal of such a requirement would be to prepare students for life-long learning in a century when much professional training and development will be primarily or solely available online. The evidence in support of and in opposition to such an approach should be studied by a faculty committee and a recommendation provided to the Provost and the Faculty Senate during the timeframe for the divisional strategic plan.

Context for Plan Execution

In setting goals for new distance-education courses or course requirements, we should remain mindful that new and better software options for course delivery should be considered in the next few years, including in the areas of real-time streaming video and examination security. Course

development or redevelopment may be contingent in some cases on the availability of new software or faculty training. We should also give special consideration to the challenges of delivering certain lab courses and other specialized courses for distance instruction. Additional institutional investments may be required to develop certain courses or to offer them at scale. Still other investments may be required to provide support services to a growing number of distance-education students.

As the College faculty are aware, the College currently is developing new distance offerings at the graduate level. The acquisition of new software resources and an increase in the number of trained faculty will also help with our work to expand graduate distance offerings, whether such offerings are developed entirely in-house or in cooperation with vendors or corporate partners, in full consultation with the College's faculty and academic leaders.

While the current plan rightly emphasizes divisional activities and the work of faculty, academic support staff, and academic administrators, our DE success also is dependent on our close partnership with several offices and programs outside the Academic Affairs Division, including in particular the Division of Information Technology. Close consultation and collaboration with the relevant offices and programs across the College will be essential to the success of the plan.

Approved with Minor Revisions: November 2018

Signed: _____
        Brian R. McGee, Provost