

REPORT OF A REQUESTED FOCUSED VISIT FOR CHANGE

Advancement Section

TO

**NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY
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The Higher Learning Commission

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EVALUATION TEAM

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ADVANCEMENT SECTION

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A. Observations of Team Regarding Change Request

During the Focused Visit to review the request of Northern Arizona for institutional change in order to offer online programs, the team made the following observations:

A-1: Northern Arizona University is well positioned through its mission and its mandate from the Arizona Board of Regents to develop and provide online programs for rural and urban populations throughout the state and beyond.

A-2: NAU has been successfully providing distance education, distributed learning opportunities, and online programs for a number of years. It has a rigorous process for program approval and it provides a range of sources for faculty development through CTEL, CRADLEE, E-Learning, and the Library. All programs are highly valued and were highly praised by faculty.

A-3: Building on their awareness of the need for engaging pedagogies for online programs, several faculty mentioned that their face-to-face teaching has also improved. Many faculty have developed, or are in the process of developing, hybrid programs that combine distance learning with face-to-face learning.

A-4: Faculty are engaged in scholarly research to provide empirical evidence of the impact of online programs on student learning and retention.

A-5: NAU has a robust 2005-2010 strategic plan that embraces distance learning. Moreover, the University implements a continuous strategic planning cycle that features annual reviews of progress and accompanying updates. NAU is positioned well to respond strategically to Arizona's future challenges outlined in the document *Redesigning Arizona's Public University System*. It can directly respond to the challenge of expanding student access through its distance learning programs and strong partnerships with community colleges. Clearly, NAU's distinctive niche is to broaden its statewide presence through collaborations and distance learning.

A-6: Budget summaries for Extended Programs/Distance Learning reveal that revenues surpass expenses for distance education and therefore, contribute to the overall health of the University. NAU administrators report a balanced budget for FY 05 with reserves (\$5 million in excess of tuition revenues) and NAU is within range on strategic financial ratios.

B. Consultations of Team

The top level of administration at NAU has already identified where attention needs to be paid in terms of infrastructure, implementation, and assessment in order to provide effective online programs, and have allocated fiscal and human resources to provide support where it is needed. Based on the patterns of evidence provided in the Assurance section, the Team is confident that NAU has developed, and continues to improve, the infrastructure and processes of strategic planning, curriculum planning and development, and faculty and student support to offer effective online programs. The following consultative advice emerges from questions raised by faculty and administration.

B-1: Faculty Development: Last year, the Director of faculty development programming offered thirty-five different workshops to a total of more than three hundred faculty members, all on a 25% position. With so many faculty members involved, or planning to become involved, in online learning, the team suggests that NAU might consider making this position at least a 50% position.

B-2: Writing Center/AZ Tutorial: Several faculty members mentioned that the Writing Center was closed during the summer term. Given the importance of support for writing for distance learners who communicate by writing much more often than their on-site counterparts, the faculty thought that assistance for students should be available year round. The Team understands that AZ Tutorial is available year round, but noticed that not all faculty and not all students were aware of what it could offer. Bearing in mind that there are resources this coming year for a few one-time projects to support teaching and learning, the team suggests that a grant might be made available for one or more faculty members to conduct a study to explore the writing needs of students, the roles of the Writing Center and AZ Tutorial, and possibly the student use of online formative assessment of written work by programs such as Intellimetric (developed by Mark Shermis at the University of South Florida with the help of a FIPSE grant). This funded project, carried out by faculty, could provide the information that faculty need to help their students make optimal use of available resources, or provide concrete information about and projected costs of possible additional supports.

B-3: Faculty Workload: Several faculty stated that teaching online courses requires significantly more amounts of time than teaching face-to-face courses. The Chronicle of Higher Education has referenced research that suggests that there is no significant difference. Currently, the evidence is inconclusive on both sides of the issue. But the fact that so many faculty teaching both online and face-to-face courses have this perception suggests that it might be very useful to provide grant funds, again on a one-time basis, for faculty to conduct a study over the next year to determine whether, in fact, online courses do require more time than face-to-face courses.

B-4: General Education: The team noted that all undergraduate programs, whether online or face-to-face, have the same general education requirement, basically a liberal studies distribution approach, with a clearly defined number of humanities, social sciences, and science courses required,, embedded in a curriculum through which nine essential skills and three thematic foci are stranded and linked to key milestone courses – a junior level writing course and a capstone course – in the major program of study. At the same time, when we asked faculty what defined a Northern Arizona University baccalaureate degree, there was no consistency in their response. The general education or liberal studies requirements was not seen as a unifying element. Instead, what most faculty agreed to be the case was the importance of the environment, and of individual and shared responsibility in relation to the environment. The Team suggests that the faculty and administration of NAU might like to revisit their general education requirements to determine what makes an NAU degree unique and special. This work

may be even more important as the move to develop four year community colleges begins to take shape.

B-5: Assessment of General Education: The Team observed that NAU faculty have identified several common learning goals for the general education program. At the same time, we noted, as did the recent Focused Visit Team on assessment and strategic planning, that assessment of student learning focuses on course-level learning. We noted the recommendation in the 2003 Report of the 2002 Focus Visit that NAU consider the use of electronic portfolios to assess improvement and achievement in these common learning goals in relation to the major or online program. The WebCT Vista program that is being adopted by NAU has this capacity, which is well worth exploring. We understand that earlier forays into electronic portfolios were not successful. However, in the past three years, electronic student portfolios have evolved to a much more user friendly state, with a more stable technological infrastructure, and more customizable to individual campus and programmatic needs. On that basis, we suggest that NAU consider the possibility of assessing student learning in their common goals through electronic portfolios.