



## **Synopsis Request for Institutional Change**

Submitted to the Higher Learning Commission of the  
North Central Association of Colleges and Schools

### **Description of the Change**

Northern Arizona University is seeking Commission approval to offer unlimited on-line programs in keeping with our mission, on-campus academic programs, and resources. Northern Arizona University's on-line programs primarily serve students in Arizona, but also enroll students from throughout the United States and other countries.

The University presently offers 29 undergraduate and graduate degree programs, certificates, and endorsements on-line. These programs are offered entirely via the Internet, with the exception of certain professional programs that involve supervised clinical or professional field work in addition to didactic courses (Dental Hygiene, Education, and Nursing programs). A number of the programs offered on-line are accredited by disciplinary or professional associations (noted with an asterisk).

#### On-line Degree Programs, Certificates, and Endorsements

B.A.i.L.S. Parks & Recreation Management  
B.A.i.L.S. Public Agency Service  
B.A.i.L.S. Enterprise in Society  
B.A.i.L.S. Arts & Letters  
B.A.S. Computer Technology  
B.A.S. Health Promotion  
B.A.S. Public Agency Service  
B.S. Nursing (RN-B.S.)\*  
B.S. Health Promotion  
B.S. Hotel & Restaurant Management\*  
B.S. Parks & Recreation Management\*  
B.S. D.H. Dental Hygiene\*  
B.S. Ed. Career & Technical Ed.: Occupational Education Emphasis  
B.A.S. Early Childhood  
M.Ed. Career & Technical Education  
M.Ed. Educational Technology  
M.Ed. Elementary Education  
M.A. Applied Communication  
M. of Administration  
M.S. Nursing\*  
Certificate in Public Management  
Certificate in International Tourism Management  
Certificate in Restaurant Management  
Certificate in Educational Technology  
Certificate in Parks & Recreation Management  
Certificate in Professional Writing

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## Anticipated Outcomes of the Institutional Change

The University seeks to expand and improve student learning through distance degree and certificate programs delivered on-line in a virtual, learner-centered community. The central goal of these programs is to bring the faculty and student service resources of the Flagstaff campus to distant learners. Through the design and delivery process, the University has enabled greater engagement of core faculty in distance programs and of students with a community of learners. Student learning is enhanced through deliberate development of instructional and program design practices informed by learner-centric principles.

Northern Arizona University also has increased the ability of the institution to develop programs that respond to needs of learners, employers, communities, and other stakeholders regardless of location. As part of the Arizona Board of Regents system redesign, the University developed the concept of “Expand on Demand” as a partial answer to serve the 100,000 new Arizona college students expected by the year 2020. One key strategy for responding to demand in the context of a growing state population, changing needs of learners, and a dynamic economy is to utilize on-line degree programming to serve students in emerging areas of demand. On-line programs provide a broader range of program options to students while aggregating students from all over the state to ensure enrollment that sustains multiple programs in the face of increasingly limited public funding for higher education.

Approval by the Commission of this institutional change request will provide Northern Arizona University with an enhanced ability to fulfill its Arizona Board of Regents endorsed mission to provide access to baccalaureate and graduate education in underserved regions of the state. The change is also an outgrowth of institutional strategic planning.

Support for the change comes from the Arizona Board of Regents’ sanctioned University mission statement: “To provide an outstanding undergraduate residential education strengthened by research, graduate and professional programs, and *sophisticated methods of distance delivery.*” (Italics added) Further support for the change can be found in the University’s values: “...To offer a rigorous, high quality education to all students....Place learner needs at the center of our academic and service planning, policies, and programs....Provide all qualified students with access to higher education....” Finally, the change request is directly linked to one of the seven strategic goals in the University’s 2005-2010 Strategic Plan: “Provide leadership in the development, use, and assessment of technologies in administrative systems and educational programs.”

While the University has traditionally been responsible for outreach to rural areas of the state, in 2003 the Arizona Board of Regents, through their innovative “Changing Directions” initiative, eliminated geographic service area boundaries and encouraged NAU to expand offerings in urban areas to meet the demands of their increasing numbers of students. In 2004 the Arizona Board of Regents transferred leadership of Arizona Regents’ University, the state’s “virtual university,” to Northern Arizona University recognizing our success in providing on-line courses and degrees. Together, these actions by the Arizona Board of Regents reinforce the mission given NAU by the Board.

In November of 1999 Arizona voters approved Proposition 301, a sales tax dedicated to education at all levels. In 2000 the Arizona Board of Regents approved priorities for the use of the sales tax funding, with access and work force development included with research as the primary foci. The Arizona Board of Regents allocated \$3.9 million (about half the NAU allocation) to the University’s access and workforce development initiative. Another \$2.2 million was

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allocated to the E-Learning initiative that supports research, development of infrastructure, and assessment of learning in electronic environments.

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### **Necessary Approvals Obtained for Proposed Change**

All necessary approvals for on-line programs have been obtained. Approvals for on-line programs are primarily internal. In instances of degree programs not previously offered by the University, approval of the Arizona Board of Regents is also required. The institutional bodies and leadership that provide guidance and approval for the development of on-line and other degree programs include:

- Program/Department/School Curriculum Committees
- Department Chair/Program Director/Executive Director
- College/School Curriculum Committee
- College Dean
- University Curriculum Committee (undergraduate programs)
- University Graduate Committee (graduate programs)
- Provost.

Most on-line programs are existing, on-campus programs adapted for delivery on the World Wide Web. In such instances, there is no formal University curriculum approval process required for delivery of the program on-line. However, the decision to deliver a program electronically requires planning and resource investments and do require endorsement of program level leadership and the college dean.

Beyond the college level, resource planning for on-line program development is guided by institutional and divisional strategic planning. The Distance Learning division of the University establishes strategic priorities for program development based on assessment of need and projected demand. Planning and approval for new on-line program development or the adaptation of an existing degree program for on-line delivery, often includes commitments of funding and faculty lines.

Where the University seeks to develop a new degree program for electronic delivery, approval for planning and implementation must be obtained from the Arizona Board of Regents, according to policy that governs the development of all degree programs at any of the universities in the Arizona system.

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### **Impact of the Proposed Change on Challenges Identified by the Commission in Previous Visits**

#### *Challenges Directly Related to Proposed Change*

The *Site Visit Report* (1997) of the team that conducted the evaluation for Northern Arizona University's last comprehensive review cited four challenges that have relevance to the proposed change:

- Assessment of student learning
- Strategic planning
- Faculty support for the statewide mission
- Qualifications of faculty teaching graduate level courses in statewide programs.

In 1999 Northern Arizona University submitted two Progress Reports, which were followed by a Focus Visit in 2002. The Focus Visit centered on two areas: assessment of student learning and

strategic planning and budgeting. The report of the Focus Visit review team noted the following challenges in the areas of assessment of student learning and strategic planning:

- Slow rate of implementation of assessment at graduate level
- Need for more fiscal support for Office of Academic Assessment and college/department level assessment efforts
- More needs to be done in assessment in distance learning environments
- University must establish measurable goals for strategic planning
- Formal linkages between planning and budgeting need to be “better established”
- Strategic planning needs to be infused throughout organizational culture
- Planning needs to be extended to lower levels of organizational structure.

### *Institutional Responses and Progress*

#### Assessment of Student Learning

In the period following the last comprehensive review, Northern Arizona University has developed a strong institutional infrastructure and organizational culture promoting assessment of student learning. These developments have been founded on four interrelated strategies:

- Leadership: Vice Provost for Undergraduate Studies & Director of Academic Assessment
- Faculty Responsibility: University Assessment Committee
- Support: Office of Academic Assessment & Center for Research, Assessment, and Development of Learning in Electronic Environments & Faculty Development Program
- Policies: Degree Program Assessment and Program Review Policies.

Through these key strategies, the institution has made numerous improvements in its efforts to assess student learning and use evidence about student learning to guide curriculum development and institutional practices.

Leadership for assessment of student learning is stranded through the central administrative, academic, and faculty governance structures. The Vice Provost for Undergraduate Studies has primary responsibility for assessment of student learning. Two administrative units are critical in carrying out this responsibility: the Office of Academic Assessment (OAA) and the Center for Research, Development and Assessment of Student Learning in Electronic Environments (CRADLEE). These units are complimented by a strong and active University Assessment Committee.

The University has robust systems in place to ensure and support assessment of student learning in degree programs and general education. These systems are buttressed by two key policies that require assessment of student learning in degree programs: Assessment of Student Learning and Academic Program Review.

Responsibility for identification of learning outcomes and assessment for degree programs resides with faculty in academic units. In the case of general education, the Liberal Studies Committee is responsible for the identification and assessment of student learning outcomes on behalf of the University faculty. The assessment efforts of faculty are guided and supported most directly by the Office of Academic Assessment and the University Assessment Committee, which collaborate in providing support for institutional assessment of student learning. The Assessment of Student Learning policy requires that all degree programs identify student learning outcomes and develop a plan for their assessment. Assessment plans are submitted to the OAA and reviewed with a standard rubric by the University Assessment Committee. Annual reports of

assessment of student learning are submitted to OAA. All plans and reports are posted on the OAA website.

On-line degree programs are guided by the same policies promoting assessment of student learning in a traditional classroom setting. Assessment plans for degree programs that are offered both on-campus and electronically address both on-line and campus student populations. On-line degree programs that are not adapted from on-campus programs are required to have plans for assessment of student learning as does any other program. Given the relative youth of on-line degree programs, full implementation of degree program assessment has not yet been accomplished; many (54%) of the on-line degree programs have plans that are ready to be implemented.

Periodic academic program review examines assessment practices and the cumulative evidence of student learning generated through implementation of degree program assessment plans.

### Assessing Student Learning in Electronic Environments

As the institution has accumulated experience with the assessment of student learning in electronically delivered degree programs, logistical challenges have been identified and strategies for addressing them have been developed. With its strong infrastructure and growing faculty expertise, Northern Arizona University is poised to be increasingly successful in the assessment of student learning in on-line degree programs. One critical resource for further progress in this area is the Center for Research, Development and Assessment of Learning in Electronic Environments (CRADLEE). CRADLEE (also called "E-Learning") supports research to inform curricular design and assessment of student learning through programs that provide funding to faculty for research, the Faculty Fellows program that supports faculty dedicated to designing research, and assessment strategies to increase effectiveness of on-line courses.

Assessment of student learning in on-line degree programs is also supported by the Faculty Development Program, which provides resources and training for faculty related to on-line course design, curriculum, teaching and assessment of student learning.

### Strategic Planning and Budgeting

Northern Arizona University has a strategic planning process in place that engages the campus community in the formulation of goals and the identification of priorities that guide the actions and resource allocations of the institution. The core of the strategic planning process is the University's Strategic Planning Council, the membership of which includes faculty, students, staff, and administrators. The Council meets regularly and provides leadership for institutional strategic planning. The council orchestrates the annual University's planning process. This process involves facilitated discussions that elicit input from groups across campus each year, along with a web-based input mechanism. The Strategic Planning Council synthesizes and analyzes input from the campus community in order to formulate the annual University Strategic Plan. The Strategic Plan establishes goals and specific objectives for the short and long term.

This academic year, the Strategic Planning Council and the Associate Vice President for Planning, Budget and Institutional Research launched two initiatives that will extend strategic planning further into the organization and forge a stronger link between planning and budgeting. The first is a unit level strategic planning process, through which units and departments at all levels of the institution will engage in planning tied to the University's strategic plan. The second is a budget planning process that systematizes budget planning for all divisions of the University. This process culminates in a retreat where the two major university leadership groups (President's Cabinet and the Council of Deans) discuss and prioritize the budget requests submitted by divisional Vice Presidents. The priorities identified by this leadership group will guide the President's budget decisions for the next year.

### Qualification of Part-time Faculty Teaching Graduate Level Courses in Statewide Programs

The development of on-line programs has been instrumental in increasing the level of qualification and supervision of part-time faculty that teach in Northern Arizona University's graduate programs off-campus. On-line programs, by their very nature, assure that control over course design resides with regular program faculty. Part-time faculty teach courses that, with very few exceptions, have been designed by regular faculty. Moreover, on-line programs enable greater engagement of regular faculty in instruction for distance programs. On-line courses are far more likely to be taught by regular faculty as a part of their regular teaching load or on an overload basis.

### Faculty Commitment to Statewide Mission

On-line programs at Northern Arizona University emerged from the interests of faculty in the use of technology to enhance teaching and learning. The process began with a small group of faculty who were early-adopters of the use of the internet to augment traditional classroom instruction. In the context of rapidly changing technology, these faculty began to develop web-based courses without the benefit of a course management system. This movement among the faculty evolved quickly as the faculty that were champions of this strategy and the leadership of the University's distance division realized the potential of web-based academic programming for serving a geographically dispersed student population.

Ultimately, faculty on the Flagstaff campus embraced the opportunity to develop on-line courses and, subsequently, on-line programs. Unlike other strategies that the institution has historically employed to deliver academic programs to students statewide, web-based programs enable regular faculty to become acquainted with students throughout the state. On-line programs also afford on-campus faculty more direct control over the instruction of statewide students through the design of courses. Greater engagement with distance learning students and control over curriculum and teaching has forged a stronger commitment of Flagstaff-based faculty to distance learning programs and the student they serve.

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## **Plans to Implement and Sustain the Proposed Change**

### Curriculum Development and Program Planning

Uniform policies govern the development of on-line and traditional curricula. NAU's full-time faculty, with support from department chairs, college deans and administrative staff, have responsibility for design and oversight of all on-line courses and programs. This design and development is accomplished primarily by the full-time faculty at Northern Arizona University. Full-time faculty have developed 81 percent of the 276 courses created over the last four fiscal years. In addition to instructional design, the regular faculty are also responsible for the creation of all University curricula, regardless of the method of delivery. Faculty in academic units of the University decide what mixes of technology and traditional face-to-face courses are most appropriate for their programs, and more specifically, to individual courses.

### Instructional Staffing and Evaluation

The regular faculty of the University are able to teach most of the web-based courses embedded in on-line programs. Unlike traditional instruction at statewide locations, on-line instruction does not require faculty to travel. This makes engagement of our regular faculty more feasible and attractive. In cases where part-time faculty are hired, the academic unit that is home to the program determines the qualifications required and make the decision to hire a particular

candidate. The department or program leadership provides orientation and supervision for part-time faculty.

### Program Development and Oversight

On-line programs are developed and subject to the oversight of all regular academic bodies through which faculty and academic leaders engage in shared governance of academic programs. The constitution of the Northern Arizona University Faculty Senate specifies the process for new program development. New courses and programs, regardless of means of delivery, are proposed by faculty at the program or department level. Approval for newly proposed programs must be obtained from the departmental/program curriculum committee, college, or school curriculum committee, and the University curriculum committee or University graduate committee. New programs must also be approved by the college Dean and Provost.

Once a new program is approved, the responsibility for the implementation and oversight of the program resides in the academic unit. All decisions regarding curriculum, staffing and students are made by faculty in academic programs. Local academic leadership for online programs varies in accordance with the organizational structure and practices of the colleges. Programs are led by department chairs, program coordinators or directors, or executive directors of schools.

### Course Design and Development

On-line course design and development is supported through the Center for Technology Enhanced Learning. The process for web course development links faculty with a team of consultants and an instructional designer. Faculty receive training in the use of the course management system and instructional design through courses and workshops sponsored by CTEL.

The course development process is structured to ensure that faculty have ample opportunity to communicate with CTEL's expert staff and that critical features of course design are addressed and evaluated. Pedagogy embedded in course design, course functionality and access, and assessment of student learning are the features of course design that receive the greatest attention in the development process. All on-line courses are subject to a final quality review that ensures functionality, access, and alignment of learning outcomes and assessment strategies. The Assessment Specialist works with CTEL staff to develop, revise, and implement an evaluation tool that measures the quality of on-line courses.

CRADLEE, and its subsidiary unit CTEL, also supports research and development projects to promote improvements in instructional design, innovative use of technology to enhance student learning, and stronger assessment of student learning in electronically delivered courses and programs. These units have also developed resources for on-line students that orient them to on-line courses and guide them through a self-assessment of readiness for on-line learning.

### Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes

Assessment of student learning in electronically delivered programs is guided by uniform University policies and systems to ensure assessment of student learning informs improvements in instructional practices and curricular design. As with all programs, as described in a previous section of this document, the academic unit is required to develop a plan for the assessment of student learning outcomes identified by the faculty. In cases where a program is offered exclusively on an on-line basis, the assessment plan will specifically target the on-line program and its student population. Otherwise, the degree program assessment plan addresses the on-line delivery of the program through strategies to assess the learning among the on-line student population.

All on-line program assessment plans are submitted to the Office of Academic Assessment and evaluated by the University Assessment Committee using the rubric developed for review of all degree program assessment protocols. This practice reflects a principle that has been embraced by the University Assessment Committee, which holds that the criteria for evaluating assessment plans for on-line programs should not be different than those for on-campus programs.

The University Assessment Committee, in collaboration with the Office of Academic Assessment, provides training for faculty in development of assessment plans and engages with departments throughout the university to promote the use of evidence regarding student learning in curricular review and decision-making. Resources provided to academic programs include template guides for writing assessment plans and reports, a criteria rubric revealing the expectations for assessment plans, an annual workshop for programs writing or revising plans, and beginning spring 2005, UAC-sponsored visits with program faculty and leadership.

The Office of Academic Assessment promotes assessment of student learning through faculty training, technical consultation to faculty and academic units, development of assessment strategies and tools, support for scholarship about teaching and learning, and guidance for formulation of student learning outcomes. OAA also serves as the clearinghouse for all formal assessment of student learning in University degree and certificate programs (assessment plans and reports are published on its website).

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## **Resources to Support On-line Learners**

### Administrative Services

The University has increased the number of local support sites around the state of Arizona. There are now 30 offices that provide a full range of academic and student support services to on-line students. For students who cannot or choose not to come to one of our offices, complete academic and student support services are available through the Extended Programs/Distance Learning Service Center. Students may access the service center via Web, e-mail, telephone, and instant messaging.

Students have access to advising, both in-person at the 30 offices around the state of Arizona and by contacting the telephone service center, to help ensure that both their personal learning objectives and the requirements of degree programs are met.

Academic support services are available on-line. On-line tutoring is provided in mathematics, sciences, writing, and Spanish through Northern Arizona University's Learning Assistance Center. The Writing Center will also consult with students on an individual basis through e-mail. There is also an array of online tutorials related to study skills, test-taking, writing and related topics in the Student Resources section of the Distance Learning web site. And, the Gateway Student Success Center's Career Services unit provides career planning services online to distance learners.

### Technology

Technologically, in 2004 the University completed an upgrade from an aging analog system to a state of the art digital system for voice, video, and data. Information Technology Services (ITS) provides hardware, database, and system administration support for WebCT and general Internet access. All network and administrative systems are monitored 24/7/365.

Within the past year three unplanned WebCT outages have occurred. After the first outage, new procedures and equipment resulted in minimal (hours not days) down-time after failures. Even at a reduced level, these outages are unacceptable to the University, and an upgrade to the newer

WebCT Vista system has been funded for \$500,000 and should be complete in the summer of 2005.

### Library Services

Cline Library has a strong tradition of providing resources and services for the students, faculty, and staff of NAU's distance learning programs. Library users today are well served by thousands of electronic books and journals, on-line services, and other tools that are as close as the nearest computer. Increasingly, content developed, located, or digitized by Cline Library staff is appearing in web courses, as are online services, tools, and opportunities to interact synchronously or asynchronously with Library staff.

Other elements of Library and infrastructure support for online degree programs include:

- Web Development and Publishing Teams that enhance and design research resources, services, academic and course support, and digital content available via the Library web site and integrated into courses
- Previous distance learning, electronic library initiative, and ARU funding has supported the acquisition of electronic journals and books, the beginning of the Library's web development and on-line course support programs, and this year will fund a portal initiative that will provide federated search and linking products that will greatly enhance access to licensed electronic content
- Two librarians located in Southern Arizona to provide assistance to students and faculty
- Partnerships with CRADLEE, ITS, CTEL, Faculty Development, the Office of Academic Assessment, the Colleges, and Distance Learning as well as representation on related advisory committees strengthen the Library's knowledge of and responsiveness to on-line degree programs

### Information Technology Services

Northern Arizona University's Information Technology Services provides information technology infrastructure for the institutions academic programs and general administration.

Student, faculty and staff problem-solving support for information technology is provided through the 24/7 Student Help Desk, and the Help Desk for faculty and staff. The Student Help Desk can be accessed by on-line students through a toll-free phone number or e-mail.

On-line students are provided with special supports related to information technology. Distance Learning maintains a student guide with a student resources section that provides some technology support. And, ITS enrolls all students into a WebCT course called TIPS (Technology, Information and Proficiency Skill) which provides on-line information and tutorials about taking on-line courses, using NAU services, help with Microsoft Office applications.

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### **Timeline to Implement Proposed Change**

Northern Arizona University has already created the programs and supports integral to the proposed change. The University's 2005-2010 Strategic Plan sets a course for continued investment in development and improvement of distance program. Future development of on-line academic programs will continue at a pace determined by the assessment of student needs and potential demand. Programs already in existence will be evaluated through all normal mechanisms for oversight and quality assurance, with improvements made as are indicated by evidence of the impact of the programs on student learning.

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## **Strategies to Evaluate Proposed Change**

The primary strategy through which Northern Arizona University will evaluate the quality and success of its on-line academic programs is research and assessment. Most important will be the various assessments of student learning in on-line degree and certificate programs. Assessment of student learning will be employed at multiple levels, course-embedded and programmatic, in order to guide improvement of existing programs and the development of new programs in the future.

In addition to the assessment that normally informs the University's faculty in their efforts to improve curricula, there will be additional effort to study the effectiveness of on-line courses and programs. The Center for Research, Assessment and Development of Learning in Electronic Environments will coordinate and support efforts of faculty to research the impact of web-course design on student learning. CRADLEE is also developing a set of standards and best practices that will be used to guide course development and evaluation.

Students graduating from on-line programs are surveyed along with all other University graduates, as are the University's alumni. These surveys will provide the institution and academic units with data about student satisfaction, self-assessments of learning, placement, and other indicators of student success beyond graduation. Surveys of graduating seniors and alumni have been conducted at Northern Arizona University for the past seven years.

A recent summary report on graduating seniors focused on the difference in responses between on-line degree seekers and traditional degree seeking students at Northern Arizona University. The general conclusion of the report was that whether comparing on-line degree seeking students to traditional students, or comparing students that have taken both IITV and web courses to those that have never taken either, little to no significant difference exists between the different populations on a variety of satisfaction questions and questions meant to measure the extent that NAU aided in the development of specific skills.

Evidence obtained through various assessments of student learning and success will provide guidance for the improvement of on-line programs. Through annual assessment of student learning in degree programs and periodic academic program review, on-line programs will be subject to regular evaluation in relation to student outcomes. Evaluation of on-line academic programs at Northern Arizona University is guided by the *Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs*, as referenced throughout this document.

The proposed change is a direct outgrowth of institutional and faculty commitment to provide educational opportunities for underserved students and communities. It was, in part, the convergence of the need to expand off-campus programming and the development of expertise in technology-enhanced learning that propelled the creation of on-line programs. Further development of on-line offerings will build on Northern Arizona University's strengths in the use of technology to promote student learning.