

PRAIRIE VIEW A & M UNIVERSITY

Distance Learning Program External Evaluation Report

August 29-31, 2007

Prepared by

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Submitted to

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Review of the Distance Learning Program at Prairie View A & M University

Executive Summary

The Distance Learning Program at Prairie View A & M University (PVAMU) was reviewed over the period August 29-31, 2007. Diane Bowles, Ph.D., former Director of the Videoconferencing Training, Research and Evaluation Center (ViTREC), and Director of Distance Learning at Clark Atlanta University conducted the review. The evaluator now serves as Assistant Vice President for Government Sponsored Programs and Research at Johnson C. Smith University. The three-day visit included visitations to the Woodlands and Northwest campuses, the main campus and the College of Nursing located in the Medical Center in Houston. The evaluation was qualitative in nature and relied heavily on reading written reports and program documents; internal records; consultations and interviews with stakeholders; observing and listening at site visit meetings; asking questions during individual and group discussions; and visiting the University's Website.

Prairie View A & M University's distance learning program was reviewed based on current practices and procedures for model programs in higher education. The purpose of this evaluation was to provide useful information for program decision making and a good basis for considering future improvements to enhance the Distance Learning program. The results of the evaluation portray a clear picture of the program's success in meeting its objectives. The general message of the recommendations that follow is one of fine-tuning an already viable and established distance learning program. Most of these recommendations are offered as fodder for serious consideration in the spirit of program improvement. PVAMU appears to value its obligation of public service, along with its focus on increased revenues, as the driving forces behind the provision of distance learning instruction. It appears that all the distance learning courses and programs developed are complementary, rather than competitive, with on-campus programs.

The University participates in the use of proven and effective distance learning technologies and instructional approaches and activities target the University's strengths and serve the core mission of the University. The most notable program findings by the consultant were:

- 1) The need to formalize the procedures and methods for planning for budgetary costs associated with both classroom and technology support. An Annual Financial and Technology Profile Report should be prepared to document these expenditures and accomplishments. Such a document is important to inform senior administrators as they make decision on how to institutionalize the office of distance learning. Currently Title III is a major supporter of distance learning operations but the Department of Education's Title III IDUES Office stipulates the institutionalization of programs and a reduced dependency on government funds to support day-to-day activity operations;
- 2) The need to incorporate True Outcomes as a comprehensive approach for tracking and evaluating student learning outcomes in addition to students' satisfaction surveys

and other faculty measures for assessing the quality of instruction or the merits of the distance education courses; and

3) The need to perform a comprehensive market research study to identify program areas where PVAMU can make a significant impact beyond the local and state levels to national and international levels given the dynamic technology infrastructure and high quality that has been developed.

General Observations

Educational experiences delivered via distance education are consistent with the high academic standards of PVAMU. The University demonstrates organizational commitment to alternative instructional delivery systems as evidenced by its cross - divisional impact. Administration, faculty and staff are enthusiastically involved in distance education. Senior administrators strongly support these initiatives and faculty to whom the evaluator spoke showed interest and involvement in all facets of the distance education process, including student support services, curricular and administrative policies, faculty development, incentives and financial investment. Quality spans across course content, delivery technology, student services, and other critical elements that define a student's experience at PVAMU. The institution has a well-conceived plan to guide its efforts and it is strategic in nature, identifying the educational opportunities that are considered as part of the planning process. Moreover, the Distance Learning Council composed of key administrators, faculty and other stakeholders ensure all distance education classes are high quality and meet all requisite standards.

Report Limitations

During this three-day visit, the evaluator did not administer prepared formal student and faculty surveys nor conduct focus group discussions due to time constraints imposed by the beginning of the new academic year being in progress and users not available to obtain extant data. Thus, this report does not contain results gathered from student input through faculty course evaluations or a review of faculty course syllabi redesigned to incorporate teaching strategies at a distance.

Acknowledgements

This evaluation required cooperation and commitment from a number of individuals. Primarily, the evaluator wishes to express sincere appreciation to Prairie View A & M University for sponsoring this endeavor. In addition, the evaluator acknowledges the assistance of the many people who helped in gathering information, clarifying procedures and drawing conclusions in the course of conducting this evaluation. John Williams provided invaluable information and guidance at all stages of the work. Lora Williams of the Title III Office gave helpful comments and advice along the way. Staff, technicians and others from the Office of Distance Learning gave their time and energy to the task of assisting with requests for data and documentation.

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Overview of the PVAMU Distance Learning Program

Founded in 1876, Prairie View A & M University (PVAMU) is the second oldest public institution of higher learning in the state of Texas. With an established reputation for producing engineers, nurses and educators, the University offers baccalaureate degrees in 50 academic majors, 37 master's degrees and four doctoral degree programs through nine colleges and schools. A member of the Texas A & M University System, the University is dedicated to fulfilling its land-grant mission of achieving excellence in teaching, research and service.

The central purpose of distance learning at Prairie View A&M University is the elimination of geographical distance and time as barriers for access to quality course programs. Current course offerings include education, agriculture, sociology, engineering, social work, English, Spanish, speech, business, juvenile justice, health, architecture, and nursing.

As a support service for the academic enterprise, distance learning works collaboratively across the university community to:

- electronically extend Prairie View's campus through NORTHSTAR and TTVN Telecommunications Networks for video delivery and through WebCT for online course delivery;
- provide an open learning environment where teaching and learning can occur anytime and anyplace;
- share practical applications of the university's knowledge and expertise to benefit society and support the economic growth;
- provide training for faculty and staff involvement in Distance Learning;
- increase Prairie View's access to the world and the world's access to Prairie View;
- research Distance Learning environments and emerging academic technologies

PVAMU maintains state-of-the-art robust systems, adequately trained technical and support personnel, and dedicated faculty to offer a quality distance learning program to its students. Technical assistance in course development and continued faculty support are available and ensures that the transition from face-to-face teaching to hybrid and online instruction are effective and represent best practices.

Evaluation Process

The review of the Distance Learning Program at PVAMU was goals-based and formative in nature. The evaluator examined the extent to which the distance learning program was meeting predetermined goals as outlined in its institutional report on distance education and the Title III objectives. Information obtained from the evaluation should assist with adjustment and alignment of goals and objectives along the way as necessary when seeking continuous program improvement and development.

Methods used for gathering information on the Distance Learning Program at PVAMU included:

- 1) Reading – written reports, handouts, Institutional Report/Operating Plan, Distance Learning Website
- 2) Recording – internal records, program files
- 3) Observing/Listening – activities, meetings, demonstrations, a multipoint videoconference forum, direct observations
- 4) Questioning –individual/small group, interviews and informal discussions with Senior Administrators, Director, Faculty, Support Staff, students and other institutional stakeholders

Using the above methods during the three day site visit, the consultant met with numerous individuals, including talks with campus senior administrators to understand what the business and academic drivers are, from both a University perspective and collegial viewpoint. The consultant also conducted interviews with the distance learning staff and reviewed grant documentation with the Director of Title III. The evaluator was seeking sufficient evidence to determine if the program is effective and making good progress to improve all aspects of distance learning development and delivery. In all the face-to-face visits, key campus stakeholders appeared to be candid in their responses to questions and were willing to discuss challenges and plans to grow and expand future distance learning offerings.

The review of the existing data, such as course materials, program documents and standard program measures were easily accessible and readily available. Because this is a distance program, interviewing and group techniques were not practiced. The evaluation was limited in terms of surveying students for their responses to the success of distance learning. Likewise, no focus group discussion was conducted with a cadre of faculty teaching courses at a distance. Due to time constraints with the beginning of the academic year in progress, one-on-one and small group interview formats were chosen. For the same reason, interviews were also the chosen methodology for the administrators.

Wednesday

On Wednesday afternoon, August 29th the Distance Learning Director took the consultant to The University Center. The University Center is a 78,000 sq. ft. building featuring the latest technological amenities facilitating distance learning as well as traditional learning for a partnership of universities and colleges of the community college districts. Six universities and the community college district, including five colleges, have joined together to offer unduplicated bachelor's (26) degrees, master's (30) degrees, and four special programs (2 doctoral degrees and 2 post baccalaureate teacher certification programs) for a total of 60 programs.

The consultant conducted one-on-one meetings with Penny Westerfield, Associate Vice Chancellor and Debra Bettis Britton, Director of Academic Student Services. Leaders at the Center conducted a tour of the facility for the evaluator and provided pertinent Center documents to include a copy of the 2007-2008 Faculty Handbook and a Fall

2007 Schedule. They gave an overview of their duties as distance learning site administrators for all the institutions who share the use of the Center. Gerry Tindall, Program Manager at NHMCCD, provided a technical demonstration of the videoconferencing facilities. The manager detailed the technical support offered to faculty using the facility as well as their familiarity with the videoconferencing hardware and software. The technology used consisted of a computer, an Internet Protocol (IP) connection, synchronous videoconferencing, an Elmo document stand. In the videoconferencing room the evaluator could observe the technical systems and components of the faculty teaching station that also has directions for using the teaching tools and instructions for seeking help. It was explained how proctors are used for administering and distributing student exams if the professor is teaching from a distant site.

The lobby area of the Center was appealing, comfortable and easily assessable from the adequate parking area. The evaluator observed staff treating the students as customers and offering help as they walked around the facility using the services. Students at the Center appeared comfortable and were engaged in their studies either alone or in small groups.

Thursday

The evaluator devoted Thursday to the Main campus with the focus on interviews with senior administrators, Title III personnel and staff in the Office of Distance Learning. Upon arrival to the office, Samuel Adams, Network Manager, who works to provide design, installation, operation, maintenance and redundancy support for the distance learning program. Mr. Adams provides technical support required to troubleshoot and run the day-to-day network scheduling and service operations. The evaluator observed a demonstration of the main technical systems supporting the Distance Education Program. The evaluator was shown the distance learning calendar with various classes that were being connected across the state through the PVAMU office. A technical tour pointing out the hardware (multipoint control units, showing all the , including the redundancy platforms in place to insure reliability concerns. the operation and maintenance support. Overall it appeared that the technology support included security measures, reliability of the technology and plans for upgrades as the program continues to grow.

Next. Charlene Stubblefield, Senior Instructional Designer/Trainer sat down with the consultant to review the gamut of faculty training. The Designer/Trainer showed documents supporting how faculty are taught course design. The consultant reviewed the faculty and student evaluation forms.

Carl Taylor, along with the Distance Education Director, took the consultant on a tour of an interactive videoconference site at the main campus. The evaluator was able to see a multipoint discussion taking place among distance collaborators. While PVAMU did not join this videoconference, the evaluator was able to see basic equipment in operation, hear the quality of the audio, observe the initiation and termination of the

connections among the videoconference sites along with the stability of the connections.

The consultant met with the Title III Director who shared information regarding the use of funds to support the Distance Education Program. There are plans that the program will become self-sufficient. Related to this, the Title III Director was concerned that students are not charged a distance education fee during the summer. In the Director's estimation, doing so would alleviate dominant reliance on Title III funding support. While visiting with the Title III Director and staff, the consultant had an opportunity to meet other faculty who were knowledgeable and participants in the distance education program. One faculty member, Dr. Laurette Foster, Professor in the Department of Mathematics, echoed the importance of the distance education program at Prairie View.

Friday

The Title III Director accompanied the consultant to the office of the Associate Provost for Academic and Student Affairs, Dr. Michael McFrazier, on Friday morning. The Director of Distance Education joined us. During this meeting, the consultant learned the vision of the school for distance education and its strategic importance for the future.

Later on the last day of the site visit, the evaluator was taken by the Director to visit the PVAMU College of Nursing which is located in the Texas Medical Center in Houston. Briefly, the Vice President for Research and Development, Dr. Willie Trotty, joined us. There Isaac Smith, Director of the Human Patient Simulator Lab, spent time taking the group on a tour of the College of Nursing facility. The consultant was shown how technology assists in the teaching of Nursing students.

This report presents on the following pages a summary of the strengths and commendations based on document reviews, interviews, discussions held with University administrators, faculty and staff at PVAMU. It is hoped that the evaluation will provide documentation for future program expansion.

Program Strengths

The mission and vision of the Distance Learning Program at PVAMU has been defined consistent with the University's mission and goals. Moreover, formal internal and external needs assessments were completed as the program has evolved. The institution has a demographic profile of their typical distance learning student and it appears that programs decisions are tailored toward fitting the needs of the demographic profiles. Because the Director of the Office of Distance Learning is a tenured professor, it signifies from leadership the advancement of the full potential and importance of distance learning at the University as a mainstream activity that is not marginalized and isolated from the remainder of the University's academic activities.

The evaluator reviewed four service areas of PVAMU's distance education program. They were as follows: Administrative/Institutional, Student, Faculty, and Resources.

Administrative/Institutional Services

Systems and services appear seamless under the administrative/institutional component of the distance learning program. PVAMU carefully prescribes its academic operations systematically: admissions, initial advising and pre-assessment, registration, ongoing advisement, service provision, completion of assessments, and award of course credits and degrees. An online catalog is available to help students find the courses, programs and other learning opportunities they desire through sophisticated online services. Provisions exist for the same functional services as a traditional student.

The administrative/institutional functional component includes provisions for services to include the following departments: admissions, counseling, student records, financial aid, bursars and graduation. Through the Internet students may apply for admissions, obtain a course catalog and course schedule, register for class, pay tuition, apply for financial aid and scholarships, purchase books, receive course grades, obtain a transcript, update personal information and file formal complaints. They have access to critical student information such as integrated admission, student records, billing, financial aid and degree requirements under one interface. Faculty members can quickly process and give grades and up-to-the minute data help them effectively counsel students. By allowing students and faculty members to have access to this information 24 hours a day, distance learning students do not feel isolated by their physical separation from the campus.

The University has assured the integrity and quality of the current program offerings,. Admissions standards, course content, access to learning resources, and adherence to relevant University policies are equivalent for distance learning students and residential students.

Student Services

The Student Guide is online. Learning at a distance involves the use of information and communications technologies to support the program to include the Internet, databases, videoconferencing and wireless computing devices. At PVAMU, WebCT is the learning content management system (LCMS) of choice where course materials are online and online discussions appear. The distance learning programs provide students with a system that allow them to interact with other students either in discussion groups or on an individual level. Faculty provide for open-ended discussions to stimulate dialogue or collaboration among students. Students have email services, look-up access to university resources and appear to have created a sense of belonging to the institution.

Analogous to the student union in a traditional campus, the distance learning program provides students with access to online bookstore, career and academic counseling and financial aid information.

Faculty Services

PVAMU uses the WebCT learning management system. The Office of Distance Learning has a coordinator who has been WebCT trained on the functions of this system. Personnel in the Office of Distance Learning assist faculty with the development and maintenance of Web resources, uploading material to WebCT, technical support in instructional activities such as e-grading, assignment submission and testing, maintaining a video and CD library, instruction and consultation on Internet publishing and production support for scanning, authoring, printing and publishing resources.

The Office of Distance Learning has technical managers who manage the information technology and communications resources associated with the distance learning program offerings. The technical managers provide systems administration for instructional labs and help faculty prepare class instruction materials to accommodate used technologies. They create a forum for faculty to exchange pertinent information and to provide resources to better prepare for their class presentation.

In the distance learning classrooms the evaluator was told that both formal and informal communication between faculty and the student are available regarding assignments, tests, exams and to give feedback as a part of the student learning process. In addition, communication channels also allow for advising and mentoring students.

Faculty on the Distance Education Council are assessment authorities, and the council is responsible for reviewing credentialing assessments to ensure quality assurance and valid student learning outcomes. True Outcomes has recently been added to foster better assessment of student learning outcomes.

Faculty seemed satisfied with their course management system and communicated the extraordinary assistance they receive from the Office of Distance Learning in the preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of their courses. There is consistency in how courses get approved for distance delivery.

Resource Services

Information exchanges over a distance in distance learning programs. As far as transmission systems are concerned, you find both synchronous and asynchronous technologies used to support PVAMU's distance learning program. Communication between the faculty and students are both direct, face-to-face (audio and videoconferencing) supplemented by using various media such as the computer, CD-ROMs, document camera, video and audio tapes.

All distance learning students have access to library support and information services as a traditional student. They are able to borrow books, call a help desk during a 24-7 period. Students as well as faculty members receive adequate training and resolutions for any technical trouble that may occur in a reasonable amount of time.

Assessments are in place to determine the readiness of faculty and students in their use of technology for distance learning purposes according to the Senior Instructional Designer/Trainer, Charlene Stubblefield.

Suggestions and Recommendations

Administrative/Institutional

- In the PVAMU Mission Statement, mention “innovation” unless the University views distance education as one of several tools to help it fulfill its core mission.
- Monitor quality assurance mechanisms to ensure the quality and effectiveness of distance learning activities to include periodic academic reviews, surveys of student opinion, and paper and program monitoring within Colleges and Departments.
- The University should include or clearly identify in written documents that library officials serve on the Distance Learning Council to have input on the level of library services provided distance learning students.
- Ensure that as distance learning expands, staffing for vital administrative, curricular, student services and other vital functions remain manageable. In other words make operations scaleable to the new growth and continue to have all processes as automated as possible.
- Pay attention to distance learning staff support as the program continues to grow. Make sure that both are aligned properly to meet current and future growth needs.
- Review the ADA Compliance requirements for Bobby on the website and take appropriate corrective action if necessary.

Financial

- A study should be initiated to develop accurate estimates of course development and maintenance costs. Traditional policies for assessing tuition and fees do not fit the nuances introduced by distance learning. Therefore, the University should conduct a study to review tuition and fee policies for distance learning students based upon criteria of fairness, revenue generation, and competitiveness with peer institutions. Revenues redounding to the University from tuition and fees could be used to invest in the future expansion of distance learning future program operations.
- The University should adopt a financial model for distance education that assures long-term financial viability and provides financial incentives to colleges, departments, and faculty who participate in distance education activities.
- An Annual Financial and Technology Profile Report should be prepared to document technology expenditures and accomplishments. Such a document is important to inform senior administrators as they make decisions on how to

institutionalize distance education. The Office of Distance Learning Program should continue to work closely with the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs to pursue grants to fund technological infrastructure and program development. Currently Title III is a major supporter of Distance Education operations but the Title III stipulates the institutionalization of programs and a reduced dependency on government funds to support day-to-day operations.

- Review all distance learning agreements and software upgrades that support the infrastructure and investigate the possibility of levying a distance learning fee to allow for replacement of technology resources on a planned, regular schedule as the budget permits.

Facilities/Technological Infrastructure

- Any consideration of technical infrastructure must take into account the realities of constant change and technological innovation in distance education. Therefore, a comprehensive plan must be developed that includes a strategy for life cycle funding for technological infrastructure to assure that service levels are maintained and distance education programs are utilizing the most current instructional technology. The plan should also ensure that technical and instructional design support requirements for faculty and staff to develop and deliver distance education are maintained and the University's need for increased access to the Internet and connectivity are met.
- Investigate participation in the open-source and open –platform instruction technologies within the distance learning community to share technologies such as Moodle.
- Plan to increase technologies and account for students who have and do not have high-speed Internet transmission systems capabilities if more online courses are offered in the future mix of technologies for distance learning.

Faculty

- Ensure that support staff will be available to provide one-on-one training and group retraining as the distance learning program grows and more faculty become involved in teaching distance learning courses. Along the same lines, hire additional faculty as well so that class sizes remain constant.
- Distance learning staff should conduct formal “Chat and Chew” Sessions at least once each semester so that faculty using distance learning may share with each other successes, failures, identify needs, best use of the technology, and relate in a formal way issues that have arisen (pedagogy, technology, use of tools, etc.) during the past semester. Minutes should be taken and follow-up on results to ensure continuous project improvement.

- Review and study the faculty compensation model as PVAMU extends its distance learning course offerings campus-wide. Will faculty receive extra compensation for quality course development in a non-traditional mode or will the expectation be that online course development by faculty will be incorporated into the mainstream of academic activity at PVAMU? More specifically, will distance learning activities be recognized and duly rewarded in tenure and promotion decisions and merit salary evaluations? Principles of good practice as they relate to faculty participation in distance learning must include a discussion of motivations, rewards and incentives.
- Monitor the distance learning courses taught to assure that the preponderance of instruction is by regular university faculty rather than adjunct part-time instructors.
- Recognize that faculty, for the most part, are not trained as educators and therefore need support in effective pedagogy since technology raises awareness of this need.
- Regularly submit distance learning items to internal publications to alert other faculty to the value of this program.
- Market PVAMU's distance learning program to external audiences by encouraging faculty and professional staff to write about their experiences and submit articles for publications as well as give conference presentations.

Students

- Conduct an inquiry to determine if the schedule for assessing tuition and fees for distance learning students are consistent with and equitable to the traditional policies for assessing tuition and fees. If not, corrective steps should be taken to align the policies and assessments.
- Establish a Virtual Student Advisory Council as a forum for distance learning students to engage in first hand conversations regarding their academic and collegiate needs. Through the Council students may provide input and suggestions related to issues on administrative services, advising and mentoring, course organization, technology tools and support, presentation software, any distance learning barriers and input on distance learning technology decisions. This information would be useful to the distance learning program since some of this information may not be included on the regular Course Evaluation Forms.
- Compare the pass rates, GPA's and performance of students who take redesigned distance education courses to the students who take comparable traditional face-to-face courses that have not been redesigned. Also, look at other variables pre, post- and follow-up test results as well as performance of students in subsequent courses to inform decision making for the future.

- Prepare five year student enrollment trend analysis data by divisions, departments, academic year, number enrolled and number of classes for DE synchronous and asynchronous courses to

Future Study

- Conduct an assessment to determine if there are disparities between the course evaluations and drop-out rates of students who take traditional classes and those in online classes.
- Engage in an active program of data collection assessing student reactions to faculty and the technology, measuring matriculation, studying the impact of distance learning on student learning outcomes, effects of distance learning on educational processes, workloads, curriculum integration and teaching outcomes. Collected data should be distributed to distance learning staff, faculty and decision makers so that data analyses will impact policies and plans for the future at PVAMU. Such data may also be used for publication to the wider distance learning community and for research purposes.
- Provide senior administrators with data that answers the question “Has the distance learning program led to more students gaining access to PVAMU programs and if so what percentage, and are there characteristics of these new learners that make them an especially important target in the University’s overall enrollment management strategy?”
- Conduct ongoing evaluations and other types of research to measure the following aspects of the distance learning program:
 1. Effectiveness: the extent to which the program purpose has been achieved via the output of the program itself;
 2. Efficiency: Productivity of the implementation process and outputs, both qualitative and quantitative, in relation to the inputs.
 3. Impact: Positive and negative, primary and secondary long-term effects produces by the program, directly and/or indirectly, intended or unintended; and
 4. Sustainability: whether the quality activities of the distance learning program are likely to continue if Title III support has been withdrawn, and plans for the self-reliance of the program.