

**REPORT FOR A FOCUSED EVALUATION VISIT**  
to the  
**North Dakota University System Online (NDUSO)**

April 5 and 6, 2004

**THE HIGHER LEARNING COMMISSION**

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## **1. Section I: Background Information**

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The Higher Learning Commission Focused Evaluation Visit will be to review the progress of the North Dakota University System Online since the Higher Learning Commission April 2001 visit. The Focus Visit will also provide an opportunity to assess the response of the NDUS to the challenges as identified in the Report of a Focused Visit to North Dakota University System Online by the 2001 Evaluation Team.

### **1.0. AN OVERVIEW**

The North Dakota University System Online (NDUSO) is a collaborative of all eleven NDUS colleges and universities for the delivery of programs/courses via e-Learning. Colleges and universities of the North Dakota University System include

- Bismarck State College (BSC)
- Dickinson State University (DSU)
- Lake Region State College (LRSC)
- Mayville State University (MaSU)
- Minot State University (MSU)
- Minot State University – Bottineau (MiSU-B)
- North Dakota State College of Science (NDSCS)
- North Dakota State University (NDSU)
- University of North Dakota (UND)
- Valley City State University (VCSU)
- Williston State College (WSC)

NDUS colleges and universities that deliver off campus programs via eLearning are not required to be part of the NDUSO. The decision to independently offer programs continues to be a choice for each college and university; therefore, if a college or university chooses to offer a degree independent of the NDUSO, that institution needs to seek individual Higher Learning Commission approval if it does not presently have approval to deliver programs via eLearning. Regardless of the institutional decision, a student may choose to access available courses and student services as part of the NDUS collaboration.

### **2.0. THE VISIT**

With a collaboration composed of eleven (11) campuses dispersed over 70,000 square miles, the visit protocol for the Higher Learning Commission will be a combination of face-to-face and virtual meetings using the North Dakota Interactive Video Network (IVN).

Selected to participate from each of the campuses will be academic vice-presidents, distance education directors, librarians, faculty, students, and registrars, as well as financial aid, IT, student services, and business office personnel. Campuses involved in the visit will include those 11 institutions listed in Section 1.1.

**3.0. THE FOUR STAGE REPORTING PROCESS**

- 1.0.0.** Focus Visit Team will receive a copy of this report in hardcopy as well as electronic form.
- 2.0.0.** Focus Visit Team will have opportunities to discuss specific aspects of the process using a private listserv provided by the NDUS and other communication tools.
- 3.0.0.** Focused Visit Team will have access to a virtual resource room that serves as a document and campus-specific information repository.
- 4.0.0.** Focus Visit Team will meet face-to-face with personnel from the ND Higher Education System Office in Bismarck on April 5th and 6. The remainder of the visit will be conducted via teleconferences with individuals from the eleven (11) campuses using the NDUS Interactive Video Network (IVN).

## **2. Section II: The Challenges**

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The 2001 NCA team identified the following six (6) challenges. Each challenge will be discussed in the subsequent section.

- 1.0** The NDUSO needs to devote the time and resources to develop an efficient 24 hour, 7 day a week helpdesk that is responsive to learners and will accommodate multiple e-learning platforms.
- 2.0** Although the NDUSO has implemented several policies and procedures there are other policy issues that must be addressed. For example, policies surrounding fee structures and consistency of student services across campuses.
- 3.0** The NDUSO needs to develop means through which to effectively assess general education programs given that students will almost certainly be taking general education courses from multiple participating institutions.
- 4.0** The NDUSO needs to establish mechanisms through which to evaluate the technologies it employs. Individual participating institutions need to recognize distance education as a distinct category within their overall institutional assessment plans.
- 5.0** The NDUSO needs to obtain sustainable and adequate resources to support migration both to a new software platform for the statewide library system and the administrative computing system. These are critical elements to the success of the program.
- 6.0** The NDUSO needs to ensure that each campus provides equitable resources in the areas of professional development, technical support, curriculum re-design, and student services.

### **CHALLENGE 1**

#### **Identification**

The NDUSO needs to devote the time and resources to develop an efficient 24 hour, 7 day a week helpdesk that is responsive to learners and will accommodate multiple e-learning platforms.

#### **Expectation of progress from 2001 to 2004**

From 2001 to the present, four (4) learning management systems have been in use on the NDUS campuses: Blackboard, eCollege, HTMLeZ, and WebCT. NDUS institutions have addressed helpdesk applications in a variety of ways.

The four (4) Blackboard campuses and the four (4) WebCT campuses address helpdesk as a campus responsibility. In most cases, the helpdesk that serves the residential campus is the same one that serves the online student. Each Blackboard

campus has extensive hybrid<sup>1</sup> courses. The helpdesk protocol with the WebCT institutions coincides with the procedures used at Minot State University. Questions can be answered through telephone consultation or through the help of Linktivity®, software with remote real-time interactive customer service and training support.

The three (3) eCollege campuses have contracted for a 24/7 helpdesk as part of their contractual agreements with eCollege as part of the per-credit hour fee. The eCollege helpdesk handles

- questions/problems with the platform itself (system maintenance, java script errors)
- technical problems on user end (browser/ISP/security/firewall issues)
- non-technical questions such as user ID/password, questions about course tools
- plug-in support (such as RealPlayer and Flash)
- faculty support of course administrative tools

The helpdesk for HTMLeZ (a homegrown application) is handled separately by the Aerospace Program at the University of North Dakota, the developer and supporter of that application.

HTMLeZ maintains an instructor and student help section. Help topics include creating a login, finding information and downloading materials, using the chat and discussion forum, using the grade book, and other functionalities.

### **Need for further action to bring closure**

The North Dakota University System through the Higher Education Computing Network (HECN) has been and continues to develop a system-wide Help Desk. Its mission statement provides an understanding of its purpose.

*The NDUS Help Desk was created to work with and augment the support provided to the students, staff and faculty of the NDUS by the local campus help desk or other support structures.*

With the increased deployment of technology for total eLearning as well as for on-campus applications, the need for a comprehensive help desk has been emerging. HECN has been increasing the Help Desk scope and service in the last two years. A number of campuses have service level agreements with HECN to provide assistance for all times not covered by local help desks. The NDUS has benefited from the three platform experiences and the help desk solutions provided by the vendor and/or the individual campuses.

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<sup>1</sup> Hybrid means courses of mixed origin or composition including any combination of face-to-face, interactive video network, online, correspondence.

With the increased utilization of learning management systems for eLearning, license and support costs for multiple applications as well as numerous servers are now major issues. As a result of these realities, the NDUS has released an RFP to look toward a single LMS for the North Dakota University System.

Consideration of a single LMS for the NDUS with a centralized helpdesk in combination with localized helpdesks is emerging as an effective and efficient response.

## **CHALLENGE 2**

### **Identification**

Although the NDUSO has implemented several policies and procedures there are other policy issues that must be addressed. For example, policies surrounding fee structures and consistency of student services across campuses.

### **Expectation of progress from 2001 to 2004**

The Legislature has allowed the campuses the latitude to establish fee structures based on the real needs of a specific campus and program. As a result, fee structures vary from campus to campus and program to program. Online course tuition and fees range from \$130 to \$192.78 per credit across the NDUS.

Tuition and fees assessed at a specific campus may vary based on the real costs in delivering a specific program. This is true with degrees like the energy programs from Bismarck State College and the engineering programs available through the University of North Dakota.

With the Home Campus<sup>2</sup> model, responsibility for student services has essentially been that of the campus with the degree authority for a student. With the Home Campus designation, the assumption has been that student services would flow from that campus.

At the same time, consistency of student services is a system-wide concern and is not limited to the online environment. With the emergence of the new administrative system and the ConnectND portal, student services are being viewed as not only a campus concern but also a system issue. The growing expectation of the residential student for online services has driven the NDUS campuses to rethink student services and their delivery.

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<sup>2</sup> Home Campus – students select their Home Campus from among the eleven (11) NDUS campuses. If someone is not a student at one of the colleges or universities, that person will need to complete an application for the choice of a Home Campus.

## **Need for further action to bring closure**

Given the authority of the individual campuses to establish fees and to have individual funding models, it is unlikely that a standard, fits-all online or e-tuition/fee will be established for the NDUS. To date, the NDUS has not considered an e-tuition rate that would include all campuses.

On another issue, student service expectations are merging for the residential and distant student. With the development and deployment of ConnectND and the access the portal will provide, it is becoming apparent that a number of student services are best handled in a centralized manner given the experience and capabilities of the administrative computing and library systems.

## **CHALLENGE 3**

### **Identification**

The NDUSO needs to develop means through which to effectively assess general education programs given that students will almost certainly be taking general education courses from multiple participating institutions.

### **Expectation of progress from 2001 to 2004**

The challenge that an assessment process be put into place to address the effectiveness of general education in a multi-campus delivery is problematic. This assessment would be in addition to the assessment already developed, approved by the Higher Learning Commission, and used by each of the eleven (11) campuses of the NDUS for general education assessment.

The NUDS collaborative model is driven by the General Education Transfer Agreement (GERTA), a system-wide agreement on the transferability of education credits. In the collaborative model, a student selects a Home Campus. The Home Campus is responsible for registering the student in courses from Providing Campuses, issuing financial aid for courses from the Home as well as Providing Campuses, generating a single academic record, and issuing a single billing.

The Home Campus/Providing Campus model is based on the following:

- Degree-granting authority resides with the collaborating members rather than the NDUSO.
- A system-wide agreement on common course numbering for general education courses exists.
- The General Education Transfer Agreement (GERTA), a system-wide agreement on the transferability of general education credits.
- The NDUSO has a responsibility to assist collaborations rather than to duplicate existing assessment plans.
- Each of the collaboration members has Higher Learning Commission accreditation and assessment plans and philosophies for general education.

The NDUSO collaboration provides a “bank” of courses from which a student may select to complete specific programs. The Home Campus pre-determines through advisement if a course meets the requirements of the degree and if it meets the philosophy of general education core of the Home Campus. If the students selected courses from individual campuses with NDUSO granting the degree, it would make sense for the NDUSO as the degree-granting entity to have a general education assessment plan. However, under the Home Campus model, a general education assessment would be as varied as the number of students taking the courses from as many campuses.

It is not unusual for a traditional transfer student to bring a number of general education courses from multiple institutions. The campus makes a decision on the appropriateness of the course and determines if the course meets the expectation of a similar course on that campus. In a sense, the registrar’s office is making the decision if the course being transferred meets the spirit of the general education philosophy of that campus.

### **Need for further action to bring closure**

General education is the responsibility of the individual campuses. The assessment of a collaborative student’s general education core will remain with the Home Campus. The Home Campus also has degree granting authority. With that authority, Home Campus is responsible for the philosophy expressed in that campus’s general education protocol.

The NDUSO will not create a separate general education philosophy/assessment for collaborative students in the NDUS

## **CHALLENGE 4**

### **Identification**

The NDUSO needs to establish mechanisms through which to evaluate the technologies it employs. Individual participating institutions need to recognize distance education as a distinct category within their overall institutional assessment plans.

### **Expectation of progress from 2001 to 2004**

In 2001, the NDUS campuses were developing online courses and programs through the work of faculty early adopters. As a result, multiple learning management systems as well as discrete online technologies such as email and HTML pages were being used. In addition, uneasiness with selecting a single system-wide platform existed for fear that it would disappear in the blink of a dot com. Four (4) learning management systems were and are being utilized across the NDUS. When selected, all of them were chosen for the right reasons.

The necessity of evaluating the technologies came to the surface with two (2) major events in the NDUS. First, the installation of a PeopleSoft solution for the administrative computing system is driving the issue of interfacing multiple learning management systems and related costs. The second factor is a legislative concern of technology duplication and the possibility of cost reduction through consolidation and collaboration.

It is also becoming apparent that centralization of a learning management system may provide an economy of scale with license costs, help desk services, and the related server/server administration that is part of an LMS application.

### **Need for further action to bring closure**

At the present time, the NDUS is conducting an RFP looking to a single learning management system (LMS). The process is being facilitated by a Task Force selected by the Academic Affairs Council. The twelve-member Task Force represents the eleven campuses and includes administrative, faculty, IT, and student interests. It is anticipated that by mid-May, a recommendation will be forwarded to Academic Affairs for consideration and to the Cabinet for a decision. Information concerning the RFP is available at the following URL: <http://www.nduso.org/lms.process.htm>

The second part of Challenge #4 identifies the following: Individual participating institutions need to recognize distance education as a distinct category within their overall institutional assessment plans.

With the increased use of LMS applications as both a delivery tool for the totally online courses and as a technology application for the residential classrooms, it is becoming increasingly difficult to draw a line between those courses that are residential and those that are distant. With that phenomenon, it is probable that the distinction between residential and distant students will diminish. As a result, the Higher Learning Commission challenge “. . . to recognize distance education as a distinct category within their overall institutional assessment plans” is not necessarily a path consistent with technology and its emerging application especially in the residential environment.

## **CHALLENGE 5**

### **Identification**

The NDUSO needs to obtain sustainable and adequate resources to support migration both to a new software platform for the statewide library system and the administrative computing system. These are critical elements to the success of the program.

### **Expectation of progress from 2001 to 2004**

Since the 2001 Higher Learning Commission visit, new software platforms have been selected and are presently being implemented. A new library system, ALEPH 500, will be operational by August 2004. The current software used by ODIN, PALS (Project for Automated Library Systems), will not be unsupported as of June of 2005.

The administrative system is being implemented at the present time with a PeopleSoft solution. This administrative system includes not only higher education applications but also all state government of North Dakota. When these two (2) implementations are complete, the K-12 sector may become part of the ERP.

The PeopleSoft installation will provide the opportunity to implement ConnectND which will serve as the NDUS portal. The ERP implementation has an URL that provides updated information concerning the project and project timelines.

<http://www.nodak.edu/connectnd/>

### **Need for further action to bring closure**

The implementation of the new library system will be in 2004. The administrative system implementation has been progressing with two campuses (Mayville State University and Valley City State University) serving as pilots for the project. The remaining nine (9) campuses will begin implementation to the new system over the next 12 to 18 months.

## **CHALLENGE 6**

### **Identification**

The NDUSO needs to ensure that each campus provides equitable resources in the areas of professional development, technical support, curriculum re-design, and student services.

### **Expectation of progress from 2001 to 2004**

Since 2001, professional development, technical support, curriculum re-design, and student services have been primarily an institutional focus. With multiple learning management systems in use, collaborating has not been practical across the NDUS although limited collaboration amongst campuses that employ similar learning management systems exists. For the most part, the issues of development, support, re-design and student services have been a campus-by-campus issue.

### **Need for further action to bring closure**

With the learning management system RFP that is presently in progress, the NDUS is actively considering the benefits and challenges of a system-supported LMS. The very issues of professional development, technical support, curriculum re-design, and student services could become a collaborative effort with centralized support for the

technology and dispersed and shared support for professional development, curriculum re-design, and student services. A common LMS could make it easier to share and collaborate on professional development for both faculty and staff. With the scrutiny that IT has experienced in the recent legislative session, collaboration is recommended in order to demonstrate stewardship of limited resources.

Collaboration serves not only to assure a stewardship of limited resources, but it also establishes a protocol for faculty and campuses to share elements that improve the learning environment for the student.

### 3. Section III: Conclusion

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#### 1.0 CHALLENGES MET

The following four (4) challenges have been met and no longer need Higher Learning Commission monitoring.

##### **Challenge #1:**

The NDUSO needs to devote the time and resources to develop an efficient 24 hour, 7 day a week helpdesk that is responsive to learners and will accommodate multiple e-learning platforms.

With Higher Education Computing Network (HECN) assistance, the NDUS is addressing 24/7 helpdesk. This response is not only to the emerging online student needs but also the increasing utilization of technology in the residential classroom. At the present time, the helpdesk is not totally 24/7, but with the implementation of a system-wide learning management system, 24/7 will be operational.

##### **Challenge #3:**

The NDUSO needs to develop means through which to effectively assess general education programs given that students will almost certainly be taking general education courses from multiple participating institutions.

General education assessment is the responsibility of the campus with the degree authority. Since the NDUSO does not have degree authority but rather serves as a facilitator for the campuses of the NDUS, an overarching general education assessment by the NDUSO would be problematic. An additional assessment would be redundant.

##### **Challenge #4:**

The NDUSO needs to establish mechanisms through which to evaluate the technologies it employs. Individual participating institutions need to recognize distance education as a distinct category within their overall institutional assessment plans.

This challenge is an evolutionary process. As residential campuses continue to integrate technology into the delivery of instruction, the NDUS will continue to evaluate those technologies. This is particularly true given the system-wide RFP that has been deployed.

##### **Challenge #5:**

The NDUSO needs to obtain sustainable and adequate resources to support migration both to a new software platform for the statewide library system and the administrative computing system. These are critical elements to the success of the program.

This challenge has been resolved. The new library system is installed and is being tested. In addition, the administrative computing system is operational on two (2) pilot campuses and will continue to be implemented on the remaining nine (9) campuses during the next 12 to 18 months.

## **2.0 CHALLENGES TO CONTINUE TO ADDRESS**

Two (2) of challenges identified by the 2001 Focus Visit will continue to be addressed by the NDUS and NDUSO and will be reviewed in a future Higher Learning Commission visit.

### **Challenge 2**

Although the NDUSO has implemented several policies and procedures there are other policy issues that must be addressed. For example, policies surrounding fee structures and consistency of student services across campuses.

Tuition and fees assessed at a specific campus vary based on the real costs in delivering a specific program. Given the authority of the individual campuses to establish fees, it is unlikely that a standard, fits-all tuition/fee will be established for the NDUS.

With the development and deployment of ConnectND, it has become apparent that a number of student services are best handled in a centralized manner. The student service challenge will continue to be monitored by the NDUSO and NDUS.

The timeline for resolving this issue is impacted by the deployment of ConnectND. The new academic computing system and the portal will provide a vehicle for centralization of student services as well as utilizing strengths of the individual campuses. Resolution of Challenge #2 is intricately connected with the deployment of the administrative system. An update to the Higher Learning Commission will be appropriate.

### **Challenge 6**

The NDUSO needs to ensure that each campus provides equitable resources in the areas of professional development, technical support, curriculum re-design, and student services.

With multiple learning management systems in use across the NDUS, collaborating has not been practical given the diverseness of software. For the most part, the issues of development, support, re-design and student services have been a campus by campus issue.

With the NDUS LMS RFP currently in progress, faculty development, instructional support, curriculum re-design and student services can be addressed from a system rather than institutional level. The projected completion of the RFP is June 2004.

#### 4. Section IV: Summary

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The eLearning programs of the North Dakota University System campuses have experienced significant growth since April 2001. From two (2) online programs in 2001 to the present 53 online undergraduate and graduate degrees, the e-Learning programs of the North Dakota University System are experiencing over 7,000 enrollments per term.

##### **Enrollment Data for Spring 2004**

<b>Campus</b>	<b>Enrollment</b>
<b>BSC</b>	2616
<b>DSU</b>	208
<b>LRSC</b>	193
<b>MASU</b>	30
<b>MISU</b>	1815
<b>BOTT</b>	140
<b>NDSCS</b>	440
<b>NDSU</b>	417
<b>UND</b>	559
<b>VCSU</b>	125
<b>WSC</b>	564
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>7107</b>

At the same time, the demographics of graduating high school seniors are such that the residential enrollments on the campuses of the North Dakota University System are going to be negatively impacted in the coming years. This phenomenon has provided an opportunity for the NDUS to re-evaluate what access can mean and how each of the campuses can respond in providing increased access.

With increased diligence, the University System along with other levels of state government are being asked to find ways in which to consolidate and/or collaborate for more efficient use of limited resources. With the implementation of a state-wide (government and higher education) computing system, higher education is positioning itself to respond and to seek new ways to collaborate.

With a history of system-wide collaborations, providing access within an environment of changing needs is being facilitated as a result of challenging demographics, pressure to respond to increasing technology costs, and a student population with expectations of “anytime-anywhere” educational opportunities.

Since the initial 2001 visit, the North Dakota University System has implemented a new library management software, piloted and continues to install a new administrative system, developed and is piloting a system-wide 24/7 help desk, has released a RFP for a single learning management system for the NDUS, and has seen online courses increase from 50 to over 500 and programs from 2 to over 50.

## 5. Virtual Resources

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Academic Issues for SBHE

<http://www.nduso.org/academic.affairs.htm>

Distance Education Web Pages

<http://www.nduso.org/what.htm>

Governance and Organization for SBHE

<http://www.nduso.org/governance.htm>

Learning Management Systems

<http://www.nduso.org/lms.process.htm>

NCA Campus Reports

<http://www.nduso.org/nca.reports.html>

NDUSO Advisory Council

<http://www.nduso.org/nduso.advisory.html>

NDUSO Newsletters

<http://www.nduso.org/newsletters.html>

Other NDUS Links

<http://www.nduso.org/other.links.html>

Personnel Issues for SBHE

<http://www.nduso.org/personnel.htm>

Resource Guide for the NDUS

<http://www.ndus.edu/reports/details.asp?id=373>

Technology Collaborations in the NDUS

<http://www.nduso.org/tech.based.html>

Online Programs and Courses

<http://www.nduso.org/what.htm>