

Strategic Planning and Support of Distance Learning Programs

A Model to Centrally Develop and Locally Support Online and Blended Programs at Tufts

A Report from the
Distance Learning Service Model Design Committee, 2011

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INTRODUCTION

During the past 20 years, many colleges and universities around the world have implemented distance learning courses and programs in an effort to fulfill their missions, improve teaching and learning at their institutions, provide greater access to a more diverse student population, and to create capacity for innovation in teaching and learning. Tufts University is already among these schools. Tufts offers graduate programs that use blended learning modalities, making it feasible for non-traditional students to earn their degrees¹. Tufts' Friedman School has successfully launched three online, graduate certificate programs this September². The Poincare Institute offers a blended learning program for mathematics teachers working in the region.³ Tufts' Summer Session piloted its first online course for undergraduates during Summer Session 2011. Not only did this course receive exceptional feedback from Tufts undergraduate students, but it also saw a return on the original investment during the first year of operation⁴.

Despite the small and large successes we have experienced, the University has yet to fully leverage the opportunities distance learning programs offer. This is due in part to the fact that most of the experts in this field are distributed throughout Tufts and usually exclusive to those departments or projects who fund them. Each of the programs mentioned above have their own team of distance learning (DL) professionals. New initiatives, however, do not have a central unit to support their development, but rely instead on the acquisition of seed money to fund their own DL professionals. Without support and expertise in this field, faculty and departments are unable to implement distance learning courses and programs on their own. This is not a technology issue. Tufts has invested in the appropriate technologies at the enterprise level to support robust distance learning initiatives. The issue is that the expertise needed to develop and support a rigorous DL course or program is usually exclusive to the programs who can fund these positions and not usually available to engage in other DL efforts outside of their school or department.

Given the changing landscape of higher education today and the ever-evolving role of technology in our teaching and learning practice, the time is right to explore and articulate a cohesive strategy for distance learning at Tufts University. A university-wide committee of distance learning practitioners formed in March 2011 to discuss and explore the idea of a central service model for distance learning at Tufts.

This was the committee's guiding question:

How can Tufts better leverage our distributed expertise in distance learning so that new, high quality distance learning courses and programs can be proposed, developed, and supported without huge investments of resources and without departments or individuals having to recreate and/or duplicate capacity?

This paper is a report on the committee's activities, the results of those activities, and a discussion about how a central service model to support distance learning might fit within the culture and context of Tufts.

¹ Fletcher's Global Master of Arts Program (GMAP), Friedman's Master of Nutrition Science and Policy (MNSP), and the Dental School's DDE Program. GMAP recently celebrated its 10th anniversary.

² The certificate programs include: Nutrition Communication for Public Relations Professionals, Positive Deviance, and Nutrition Program Design and Delivery.

³ The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences received a multi million dollar grant from the National Science Foundation to develop a blended online course for Mathematics targeted to Grade 5-9 teachers in nine districts in Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Maine. The Poincare Institute is a collaboration with curriculum developers from TERC and the Physics, Mathematics, and Education Department at Tufts.

⁴ NUTR 101 Online, Summer Session 2011, saw a 53% increase in enrollment based on average enrollments from the past 4 years.

Distance Learning Courses Defined

Distance learning courses can take many forms, but for the purpose of this paper and within the context of Tufts University, we are considering them either “online courses” or “blended courses.” Both forms are always led by a faculty member and are not self-paced or automated. Online courses are those that occur completely online with no residency requirements. They can use synchronous or asynchronous communication strategies to facilitate learning. Blended courses are those that combine classroom time with online activities to better integrate learning that occurs both inside and outside of the classroom. For the sake of differentiating between blended and “web-enhanced” courses, blended courses usually do require less class time since some learning is pursued online.

The Current Distance Learning Support Model at Tufts

Many of the distance learning programs at Tufts, with the exception of the recent Summer Session pilot,⁵ have their own team of distance learning (DL) professionals. Instructional designers work with faculty to transition their courses and their teaching strategies to the online or blended mode. Instructional technologists implement and support a program’s technology needs, from multimedia development to system integration to technical support for students and faculty. DL administrators provide high level planning to integrate existing academic support structures into DL programs, work with accrediting bodies, and ensure the highest quality in academic programming.

These DL professionals are distributed throughout schools and departments with no central oversight or coordination. If an individual faculty, program, department or school wants to seriously pursue or explore distance learning offerings, and they do not have local DL capacity, then they really have no place to go within Tufts for the broad expertise and operational capacity required to develop and implement a program.

REPORT ON THE COMMITTEE’S ACTIVITIES AND RESULTS

The committee was comprised of the following members:

- Susan Brogan, Cummings School
- Patrick Connell, Friedman School
- Philip Gay, Arts and Sciences, Dept. of Education
- Paul Giguere, Friedman School
- Emma Heffern, Fletcher School
- Dara Mehta, Dental School
- Nicole Sanderson, Fletcher School
- Wendy Williams, TUSM

The Committee met in April, 2011 to begin a dialogue about an improved service model design for DL as a strategy that might benefit our individual programs and the institution as a whole. This discussion was largely framed around a SWOT analysis. We discussed opportunities and benefits that DL courses and programs provide. We identified strengths and weaknesses of the current DL support model at Tufts and we identified opportunities that a centralized service model might create. To gain a wider perspective, committee members agreed it would be informative to discuss some of these issues with faculty, deans and administrators within our respective schools.

Results from the *Committee’s* Discussions

⁵ Friedman School distance learning staff supported the distance learning aspects of the course in cooperation with Summer Session.

What opportunities and benefits do DL courses and programs provide?

- Benefits and Opportunities for Students:
 - Flexible and convenient options of study⁶
 - Alternatives for continuous, uninterrupted study (i.e., summer session, weather, or if swine flu fears of 2009 came true.)
 - Alternative modes of instruction that some students would prefer for some courses
- Benefits and Opportunities for Faculty:
 - Professional development opportunities for faculty (i.e., opportunity to work with an instructional designer with designing their course)
 - Potential for international faculty, visiting professors, research partnerships and co-teaching courses across institutions
 - Inter-departmental collaboration
- Benefits and Opportunities for Departments, Schools, and the University:
 - Extend Tufts' mission and reach
 - Generate revenue
 - Revenue sharing models – distribute revenue back to departments and programs for scholarships and future development
 - Increase enrollment in struggling programs due to a lack of propinquity to the areas from which the students come from

What threats or risks might DL courses and programs present to the University?

- Physical campuses abroad. There was discussion about trends in the middle east for example where American universities are building physical campuses in partnership with governments abroad. The committee did not view this as a positive direction for DL at Tufts. However, the model employed by the Friedman School's hybrid master's degree program in the United Arab Emirates is one that does not rely on a physical campus presence and may be a viable model for other programs looking to have a presence abroad.
- Poor quality if no oversight over development, implementation and administration. Other universities struggle with teachers uploading PowerPoint files and calling it an online course.
- Cost differential for international students
- Risk of "free for all" – other universities have experienced a period of DL course development that then needs to be reigned in for reasons of quality control, accreditation, and student support.
- Misguided perception that distance programs are guaranteed revenue generators

What are the strengths of the current DL model at Tufts?

- Distributed, or "local," services and support dedicated to a program. Faculty in particular would agree that having DL professionals within the department or school is preferred.
- Technologies based on need. If a program has local support staff, then they can adopt technologies as needed to meet the needs of faculty and students.
- Program administration lies with schools and departments
- DL programs and courses in general encourage faculty to update their course materials
- Transparency – faculty put the whole course online
- Pockets of expertise around DL at the university
- Diverse technologies and instructional methods

What are the weaknesses of the current DL model at Tufts?

⁶ Results from a Spring 2011 survey of 87 NUTR 101 students showed that flexibility and convenience ("learn on your own time") were perceived to be the biggest advantages to online and blended courses.

- No ongoing capacity to support
- No standardization or central quality assurance
- DL expertise is exclusive to programs who fund these positions
- Staff turnover can leave a program vulnerable
- No central unit looking at legislation or worrisome issues that would affect DL programs (i.e., state regulations or credit hour legislation)
- Duplication of services – Added work for registrar, student services, Bursars office
- Does not encourage innovation in teaching or new program implementation – “no money, no support”

Results from Committee Member’s Discussions with *Internal Stakeholders*

Each committee member was tasked with going back to their school or department and holding a conversation with at least one faculty member, dean or program director about some of these issues. Again, the goal was to get a broad perspective, ideally from those not currently involved in DL programs. Several questions were developed to frame these discussions around central versus distributed service models for DL program development and support. Three predominant themes came to the surface throughout all of the discussions:

1) Local, or distributed, support is ideal but not possible in most scenarios

Most people agreed, including members of the committee, that “local” staffing (those who are a part of the department or school) is the preferred way to develop and support a DL program rather than a central unit working out of a particular campus. The general sentiment is that the local support staff would know the faculty and students and related services could then become better integrated with the school’s or department’s strategic planning. However, when asked if their school or department would be willing to fund local DL professionals, most responded with “no” or “unlikely.” One respondent suggested re-training existing staff. Another thought was that a school might be willing to fund a position, but if there was a central support model or a fee-for-development cost center, then it might make more sense financially.

2) There are three “phases” of DL support identified as needed at the central level

- I. **Phase 1: Strategic planning and consultation** – “a forward looking unit that knows what is out there in terms of technology, pedagogy and policy/regulations.” There were several comments about the desire for a unit or panel of experts that serves the university as a place to get expertise on “where to start, realistic guidance on budgets, and marketing analysis.” Also, there were many comments about the need for a central unit to stay up to date on and share knowledge and best practices in the field.
- II. **Phase 2: Course or program development and delivery** – During the development phase of a distance course or program, faculty and program directors work very closely with an instructional designer and/or instructional technologist. The academic support and development is equally important to the technology support that occurs during the program development phase. Just as administrators often do not know where to begin when thinking about a new DL program, faculty do not know where to begin when designing an online or blended course. It requires a new set of skills and a significant change in the way they teach.
- III. **Phase 3: Maintenance and support** – This is ongoing support, consultation, and maintenance after a program has launched. Respondents included in this stage include: technology support, student services support for students at-a-distance (which is somewhat different than traditional student services needs), on-going training needs for new faculty and TA’s, regular course improvements and modest re-design efforts, technology upgrades, and the idea of a “safety net” – a unit who is always there in case of an emergency or staff turnover.

3) DL programs and their support structures should be a part of a school's strategic planning and integrated with other academic programs.

All respondents agreed that DL professionals add capacity to a department or school and as such, they should be integrated into a school rather than treated separately, and DL programs should be a part of a school's strategic planning. They believed that if DL capacity were integrated with their schools, then they could serve existing programs, including residential and continuing education courses and programs.

DISCUSSION ON A CENTRAL SERVICE MODEL FOR DL PROGRAMS AT TUFTS

The University needs to keep a strategic eye on distance learning. Relatively speaking, blended and online courses are in their infancy. However, DL courses and programs have been widely adopted by universities and are seen as a critical part of many school's strategic planning.⁷ They are also gaining a broader acceptance and appeal with students.⁸ Someone needs to be thinking strategically about how DL courses and programs might serve our residential students. Summer Session is a good example of how an online course can help Tufts students continue their study at Tufts while away from Boston for the summer. There are opportunities with DL programs, but there are also risks. A central unit could likely serve university leaders when it comes to identifying these risks and working at a university-wide level to both ensure that stakeholders are well informed and that the University is considering these opportunities and risks through the lens of our institutional mission and identity.

It is clear from our discussions that there is a desire to have DL expertise embedded in schools and programs so those services can become integrated with the school's activities and a part of the strategic planning process. With this expertise comes the capacity to innovate in the areas of education technologies, program enhancement and new program development, offer faculty development opportunities, and the potential to serve qualified students who might not otherwise attend Tufts. It is equally clear that without funding from a grant or some other kind of award, most schools and departments cannot have this "local" DL expertise, which is necessary to get a new program off the ground.

All agreed that no central unit could support an academic program as well as those who work in it. The desire is to develop local staffing that can support program's and school's DL initiatives and normal operations with a high-level central support from Tufts in the areas of strategic planning, consultation and upfront development. Phase 1 and 2 above (strategic planning and development and delivery) require much more capacity and investment than Phase 3 (On-going maintenance and support).

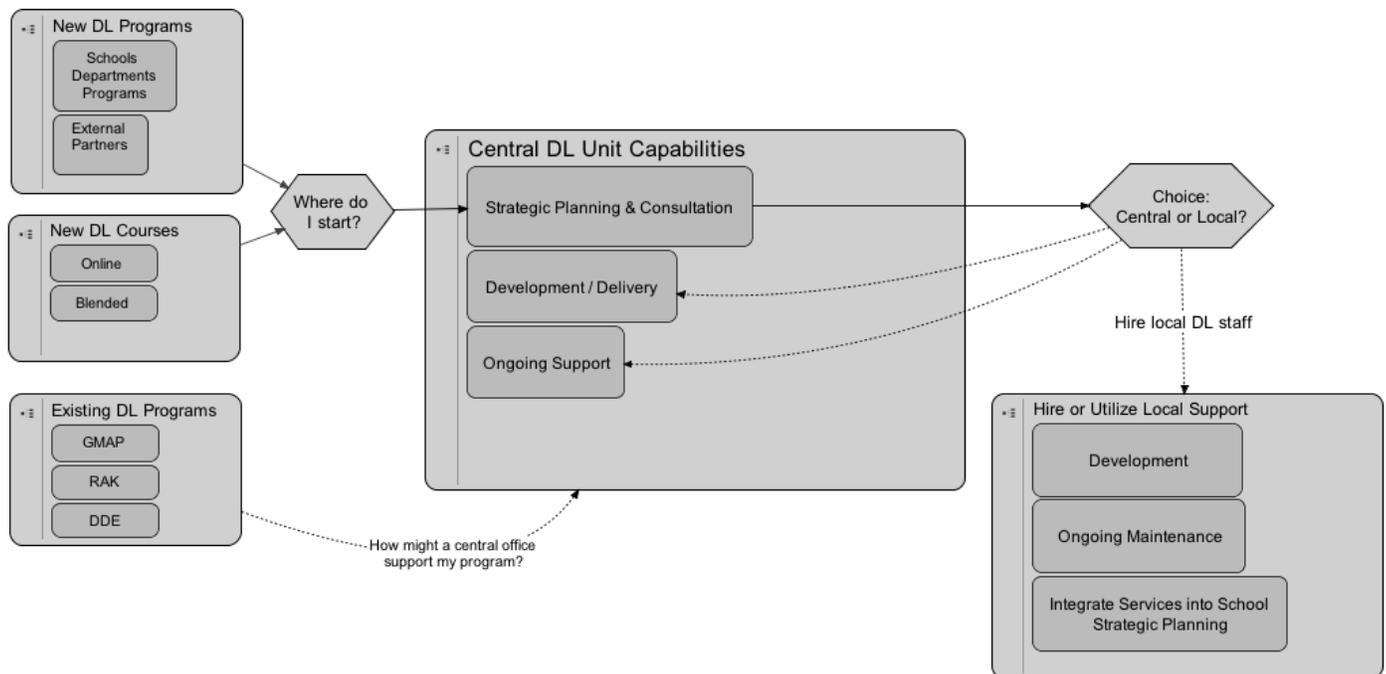
How can Tufts provide a bridge so that programs can move from conception to post-development without needing to fund the expertise that could be made available to them from a central level? The following model proposes an "incubation period" during which time programs have central support in the form of strategic consulting and development capacity. Eventually, when programs reach sustainability, they can choose to hire local DL experts to help with program maintenance, administration and on-going support, depending on their needs. The idea here is to reap the benefits of having local DL expertise, but not until after the costly phases of new program development. Once a program is implemented, there is more clarity on programmatic needs and there is less capacity needed to provide ongoing maintenance.

Proposed Model: Centrally Develop and Locally Support Online and Blended Programs

⁷ 63% of reporting institutions from a SLOAN-C report on online learning identified online learning as a critical part of their long-term strategic planning

⁸ Nearly 1 in 3 higher education students now take at least one online course according to the 2010 SLOAN-C Report "Class Differences: Online Education in the United States"

The graphic below is a visual representation of the proposed model followed by a more detailed description.



A Centrally Supported “Incubation Period” for Phase 1 and 2

Phase 1: Strategic Planning and Consultation: A central unit at Tufts should exist to serve the university with strategic planning and consultation on DL initiatives. This could include:

- Strategic guidance around academic and administrative support for distance students
- Budget and contract recommendations
- Market analysis
- Central marketing of DL programs
- Grant and proposal writing
- Setting of high standards for new DL programs and individual courses
- Expertise on DL technology and pedagogy
- Accreditation planning (in cooperation with the Provost’s Office)
- A group that stays current on external opportunities and risks to DL programs (i.e., state and federal regulations, accreditation, grant and collaboration opportunities).
- Program evaluation

Programs and schools wanting to explore distance learning could view this group as the “go-to” central service for their DL questions and needs. Tufts’ deans and executives can rely on this group to remain current in the field and to make sensible recommendations for new DL initiatives that are compatible and in-line with the overall strategic vision for DL at Tufts. Existing DL programs that already have local DL expertise can use this central unit as needed (i.e., stop gap during staff turn over times), but can rely on them to stay current on external threats to DL programming.

Phase 2: Development and Delivery: For those schools wishing to move a program forward, but who cannot afford to hire “local” DL experts, a central unit should be available to them to manage the course development process. This could include:

- Instructional design

- Faculty training and support
- Multimedia production
- Technology recommendations and implementation
- Quality assurance
- Planning for scale

Once a course or program moves into development, a department or school might choose to use the central group or hire local DL professionals depending on their budget and needs. When using a central group, existing models for revenue sharing and/or costing out services (e.g. cost center) that have been used successfully in some schools might be useful.⁹ Also, a central DL professional who is not necessarily working elsewhere, but spending time each week in the school, will better be able to leverage their expertise so they can become integrated in the school if that is desired. This way, the DL professional can also work closely with faculty and program director to guide policy for the DL program and be a conduit for knowledge from the central unit to the local school.

A Distributed Support Model for Phase 3

Phase 3: Ongoing Maintenance: Choose to stay central or go local - After development, the ideal is to have “local” DL expertise so that this capacity can become integrated within the school and be included as a part of strategic planning. The central unit could either continue to support a program or recommend appropriate staffing levels and needs. A central unit could also train existing staff when appropriate. If a program decided to hire their own DL staff, then the central unit would always be available as a safety net and resource for policies and potential risks to DL programs. This is the best of both worlds – a program can work with a central unit and benefit from their collective expertise, but in the end hire the local resources they need to sustain the program and integrate services within the school. If it made more sense to stick with the central unit for ongoing maintenance and support, then a central unit could have this capacity.

SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATIONS

This report addresses strategic and operational issues. Strategically speaking, a forward-looking unit whose expertise is in distance learning could serve the University in many ways, including identifying risks, seeking opportunities, and driving new initiatives. Operationally speaking, a central unit could provide services to departments, schools, and to faculty that would enable them to get DL initiatives off the ground. The committee and those we interviewed almost unanimously agreed that a distributed support model is the ideal, but acknowledged that this is not always possible during a program’s conception and development phase. The proposed model creates a central support structure at all phases of a DL program. It also allows for options and flexibility based on both programmatic needs and the desires of a school to integrate DL services into their strategic planning.

Recommendations moving forward:

- Expand the Summer Session Online pilot so Tufts faculty and students can weigh in on their experiences in online courses and we can begin to evaluate the effectiveness of DL courses at Tufts
- Work with the EPC to re-evaluate the AS&E policy that disallows transfer credits for an online course¹⁰
- Blended Learning Initiative to get more faculty involved in DL in a more meaningful way

⁹ Summer session and the Friedman School’s Office of Academic Initiatives are currently working on a cost-for-development model that would be used to expand the Summer Session Online pilot.

¹⁰ AS&E Transfer Credit Policies – “No on-line, correspondence, or distance-learning courses will be transferred for Tufts credit”

- Tufts Distance Learning Consortium (TDL) begins meeting with deans/program directors to begin a dialogue about DL courses and programs, services needed, barriers to implementation and possible solutions
- A University-wide committee of faculty and deans comes together to articulate a strategy for DL at Tufts
- Explore building capacity through the existing collaborative of Tufts/BU/Brandeis/BC