

Florida Distance Learning Task Force

Final Report

Submitted in fulfillment of the requirements contained in Section 1 of CS/HB 7105.

February 26, 2009

Executive Summary

The Florida Distance Learning Task Force was created through HB 7105 by the 2008 Legislature. The nine-member Task Force was appointed by the Chancellors of the State University System and the Florida College System with specific legislative assignments (**Appendix A**). These assignments reflected several policy goals which provided a foundation for the work of the Task Force. These goals included: 1) facilitating maximum affordable access for students to complete degrees and transfer credits; 2) achieving increased cost-effectiveness in the development and delivery of undergraduate distance learning courses and degree programs; 3) improving instructional and faculty effectiveness; 4) advancing technology innovations; and 5) providing accountability for funding and tasks assigned to the Florida Distance Learning Consortium.

To assist in the completion of the assignments, the Task Force empanelled six workgroups made up of college and university staff members with expertise in the specific assigned areas of study. Each workgroup was chaired by a member of the Task Force. The six workgroups were:

- Administrative Services
- Faculty and Instruction
- Fiscal Policy and Access
- Learning Object Repository
- Online Registration
- Strategic Statewide Goals

The workgroups conducted reviews of existing policies and documents, held interviews with key resource people, and met through conference calls and other technological means during the course of their work. Final reports from the workgroups with draft recommendations were forwarded to the Task Force for consideration in the final report.

In the course of the study, the Task Force reviewed the activities of the Florida Distance Learning Consortium, general distance learning course and degree statistics, distance learning structures in other states and examples of best practice approaches to the delivery and support of distance learning at the state and local institutional levels. In addition, online registration systems in Georgia, North Carolina and through the SREB Electronic Campus were reviewed, as well as the status of learning resource repositories in various states.

The Task Force recommendations reflect the essential components of a student-centered, cost-effective, statewide strategy for the development and delivery of distance learning courses and degrees through the state's colleges and universities. They are intended to build upon existing strengths while focusing on the need for action in specific areas. The recommendations include: the formal establishment of a central coordinating entity, the Florida Distance Learning Consortium; the hosting of a state-level learning resource repository; the development of an online registration process; and the promotion of the Florida Higher Education Online Catalog.

These policy and funding recommendations can serve as the basis for an effective state-level policy structure to address future challenges presented by advances in technology and the changing nature

of the instructional process. Action is critical if distance learning is to be an effective tool in the achievement of system and state goals. The Task Force urges the Legislature to consider the recommendations contained in its report as a critical step in managing the unprecedented rapid and changing role of technology in our education system.

The following are the final recommendations regarding the use of technology and distance learning in Florida's education system and address organizational concerns, academic and student support, infrastructure development and funding.

Critical State Policy Recommendations

Definition of Distance Learning

Recommendation 1: The Florida Distance Learning Task Force recommends the adoption of a definition of distance learning where at least 80 percent of the direct instruction of the course is delivered utilizing some form of technology when the student and faculty member are separated by time, space or both. The Task Force further recommends that distance learning fees as authorized in state law apply only to courses meeting this definition.

Recommendation 2: The Florida Distance Learning Task Force recommends the adoption of a definition of hybrid/blended courses where at least 50 percent and not more than 79 percent of the direct instruction of the course is delivered utilizing some form of technology when the student and faculty member are separated by time, space or both.

Florida Distance Learning Consortium

Recommendation 3: The Florida Distance Learning Task Force recommends that the Legislature consider officially establishing the Florida Distance Learning Consortium as a statewide higher education collaborative with a mission to lead and support Florida's state-level distance learning initiatives in partnership with its member institutions to include:

1. Ongoing management, operation and promotion of the Higher Education Distance Learning Catalog as required by state law. (Recommendations #4, #14 and #15)
2. Identification, execution and dissemination of collaborative contracts for desired distance learning related products and services on behalf of Florida's schools, colleges and universities. (Recommendations #7, #16, and #17)
3. Facilitation of a streamlined, online course registration process and other web-based services that support or enhance distance learning. (Recommendation #8)
4. Development and implementation of a regular process for identifying and evaluating new technologies and instructional methods that can be used for improving instruction, student learning and the overall quality of distance learning courses and programs. (Recommendations #19, #20, and #21)

5. **Support educational programs for the professional development of faculty and staff and provide information and materials for use in the development, evaluation and enhancement of distance learning courses and programs. (Recommendations #22 and #23)**
6. **Development and operation of a central repository of instructional resources, including seeking partnerships wherever possible with similar state, regional and national repositories. (Recommendation #5)**
7. **Identification of opportunities for collaboration beyond the existing membership and the development of partnerships among educational institutions, businesses and communities for the mutual benefit of participants in the expansion of activities related to distance learning courses and programs. (Recommendation #18)**
8. **Production of an annual accountability report on the state of distance learning. The report should contain the following components:**
 - **An overview of distance learning activities within the sectors.**
 - **The status of Consortium operations and activities.**
 - **An updated set of policy and procedures recommendations for consideration by the appropriate governing boards that can increase student access, improve learning or increase cost effectiveness in the development and delivery of distance learning courses and degree programs.**
 - **A review of the role of distance learning activities in support of strategic educational goals.**

Access and the Higher Education Distance Learning Catalog

Recommendation 4: The Florida Distance Learning Task Force recommends that s. 1004.09 F.S., be amended to specify that a description and link to the Higher Education Distance Learning Catalog be placed, at a minimum, within advising and distance learning sections of each institution's website and that the requirements for placing a link be implemented utilizing a consistent graphic and description.

Open Access Textbook Opportunities Utilizing the Repository

Recommendation 5: The Florida Distance Learning Task Force recommends that the Legislature consider the establishment and support of a statewide digital instructional resource repository for Florida educators with its management and operation assigned to the Florida Distance Learning Consortium.

Recommendation 6: The Florida Distance Learning Task Force recommends that the Legislature consider policies regarding the placement of instructional resources and/or open textbooks created with state funds in a legislatively-established statewide digital repository.

State-level Collaborative Contracting

Recommendation 7: The Florida Distance Learning Task Force recommends that clear authority be provided to the Florida Distance Learning Consortium to negotiate preferred

pricing and collaborative contracts for desired distance learning related products and services on behalf of Florida's schools, colleges and universities.

Online Registration

Recommendation 8: The Florida Distance Learning Task Force recommends that the Legislature consider providing authority to the Florida Distance Learning Consortium to convene a workgroup to complete the planning document for the online registration process as required in CS/HB 7105. It is further recommended that the planning document be completed and submitted to the Legislature, Board of Governor and State Board of Education by March 1, 2010.

Fiscal Policy

Recommendation 9: The Florida Distance Learning Task Force supports a 20 percent increase in the Florida Distance Learning Consortium's operating budget (\$135,000 in recurring funds).

Recommendation 10: The Distance Learning Task Force supports additional funding (\$15,000 in recurring funds) if it becomes necessary for the Florida Distance Learning Consortium to secure and pay for its own Internet connectivity in support of the distance learning catalog, the learning object repository and its general operations.

Recommendation 11: The Task Force supports dedicated funding for the promotion and enhancement of the Higher Education Distance Learning Catalog's administrative and search interface functions in order to completely address the requirements contained in s. 1004.09, F.S. and more effectively meet student needs (\$100,000 non-recurring and \$75,000 in recurring funds).

Recommendation 12: The Florida Distance Learning Task Force recommends dedicated funding to provide a sustainable infrastructure for ongoing operations to enable the establishment and continuation of a statewide digital instructional resource repository. (\$680,000 non-recurring and \$300,000 in recurring funding)

Essential Support Activities

Definition of Distance Learning

Recommendation 13: The Florida Distance Learning Task Force recommends that the classification scheme described in Appendix C be considered by the Board of Governors, Florida College System and State Board of Education in revisions to state level data collection and reporting requirements for learning.

Online Catalog Promotion

Recommendation 14: The Florida Distance Learning Task Force recommends that standard graphics and promotional materials be created and provided to each institution for use in web-based and/or print-based materials to further increase student awareness of the opportunities offered.

Recommendation 15: The Florida Distance Learning Task Force recommends that in addition to the use of public service announcements and other traditional methods for increasing student awareness of the Higher Education Distance Learning Catalog, the Florida Distance Learning Consortium place a strong focus on the utilization of search-engine, site-targeted advertising and other web-based alternatives.

Collaborative Contracting

Recommendation 16: The Florida Distance Learning Task Force recommends that in addition to campus distance learning contacts, the Florida Distance Learning Consortium establish and maintain regular communication with institutional procurement officers so that up-to-date information on favorable terms, conditions or pricing within existing contracts or agreements within Florida's education system can be collected and shared through the most effective means possible.

Fiscal Efficiency

Recommendation 17: The Florida Distance Learning Task Force recommends the Florida Distance Learning Consortium research and identify statewide support services (such as test proctoring, tutoring or help-desk functions) which can be utilized by all member institutions and provide cost savings to individual institutions who choose to participate.

Recommendation 18: The Florida Distance Learning Task Force recommends the Florida Distance Learning Consortium seek grant opportunities that provide funding of collaborative efforts in course development and the sharing of resources among institutions. It should also develop recognition/award programs to encourage faculty and staff to work together cooperatively, share resources, and ultimately save tax dollars.

Emerging Technology

Recommendation 19: The Florida Distance Learning Task Force recommends that the Florida Distance Learning Consortium be charged with implementing a regular process for identifying and evaluating new technologies that can be used for improving instruction and student learning. The process should include communication of institutional, regional and national utilization of emerging technologies, results of campus-based pilot programs and regular communication through newsletters, webinars and meeting presentations on viable new technologies, instructional strategies and any policy implications of their use.

Recommendation 20: The Florida Distance Learning Task Force recommends that the Florida Distance Learning Consortium coordinate or provide regularly scheduled events to showcase emerging technologies, including information about their effective implementation in instruction. Information about the technology events will be communicated via the Florida Distance Learning Consortium website, newsletters, podcasts, and other forms of technology.

Recommendation 21: The Florida Distance Learning Task Force recommends that the Florida Distance Learning Consortium be tasked with identifying grant opportunities requiring cooperative or collaborative arrangements with other educational institutions and/or with business and industry regarding emerging technologies.

Faculty Professional Development

Recommendation 22: The Florida Distance Learning Task Force recommends that the Florida Distance Learning Consortium use a “best practices approach” to collect and distribute professional development resources for faculty and staff through a statewide repository such as the Orange Grove.

Recommendation 23: The Florida Distance Learning Task Force recommends that the Florida Distance Learning Consortium coordinate and support e-Learning faculty development opportunities across the state by creating a web-based schedule of faculty development opportunities offered within the education community.

Strategic Goals of the State

Analysis and Recommendations

Recommendation 24: The Florida Distance Learning Task Force recommends that college and university boards of trustees encourage the expansion of distance learning course offerings so that more opportunities will exist for students to fully complete associate and baccalaureate degrees through distance learning.

Recommendation 25: The Florida Distance Learning Task Force recommends that the Legislature provide incentive funding for developing and implementing cooperative degree programs that address specific educational and economic needs of Florida identified in the strategic plans of the State Board of Education and the Florida Board of Governors.

Recommendation 26: The Florida Distance Learning Task Force recommends that the Legislature provide incentive funding for collaborative statewide effort to create fast-track degree completion opportunities for adult learners that can be completed in large part through distance learning.

Appendix A

Distance Learning Task Force Members

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Joyce Elam, Vice Provost FIU Online, Florida International University

John Hitt, President, University of Central Florida

Richard Madaus, Executive Director, College Center for Library Automation

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