PREAMBLE: Rice faculty are engaged in a wide range of digital, online activities that play an important role in their research and teaching. This report does not describe the full range of those activities, but rather focuses predominantly on the role of online, credit-bearing courses at Rice. Moreover, it is important to recognize that any implementation of future policies regarding credit-bearing online courses at Rice and the subsequent development of such courses are subject to a wide array of Federal, State and accreditation regulations and oversight above and beyond what is required for non-online courses. The present document does not address implementation at this level of detail.

Charge 1: Investigate the place of online courses within the Rice curriculum/experience.
   a. What policies are needed to ensure that online courses match on-campus courses with similar requirements, workload, contact hours and credits?
   b. What policies are needed regarding the number of allowed online courses for majors or for overall graduation requirements?
   c. Should non-Rice online courses be treated differently than Rice online courses in terms of credit?

APPROACH: The basic tenet of the following recommendations regarding online courses is that all courses taught at Rice meet the prevailing Rice standards within their discipline, provide a rigorous course of instruction, and prepare our students for their chosen career path regardless of the choice of delivery method. Online courses within the Rice curriculum should not be treated differently from other courses.

DEFINITION: Many courses make use of digital tools in disparate ways. There is a rich variety of digital education at Rice that utilizes many different resources and that is not simply encapsulated by the online delivery of courses. Under Charge 1, we restrict our deliberations to credit-bearing online classes. For the purposes of the present discussion, we adopt the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) language and define an “online course” as one “in which the majority of the class time instruction (interaction between students and instructors and among students) in a course occurs when students and instructors are not in the same place.” Thus, if a three credit hour course at Rice normally involves 42 hours of contact time, an “online course” would involve 21 hours or more of class time when student and instructor are not in the same place.

COURSE APPROVAL AND SUBSTANTIVE CHANGE: All new online courses, in the sense noted above, must follow the standard university protocols for new course approval. The creation of a new online course or program must follow Rice University General Policy No. 804-00 and must be approved by Senate, as per Senate resolution announced in December 5, 2012. In addition, it is the recommendation of this working group that when existing courses, undergraduate or graduate, are modified to include new components that result in a course
being predominantly online, they must be approved via the university Course Change process. In other words, courses modified to become “online courses” in the sense noted above, should be evaluated by department chair and the Dean to ensure that their requirements and workload remain consistent with other courses in the curriculum, and to ensure that adequate opportunity is given for students to seek aid from instructors in the given course. To help ensure that online courses are developed with equally rigorous learning outcomes and pedagogy, equivalent to on-premise courses, faculty considering the development new online courses are encouraged to engage with the Rice Online Digital Education Advisory Committee (DEAC) who can provide feedback and resources to help meet the course approval and substantive change protocols.

ONLINE CONTENT IN DEGREE PROGRAMS (MAJORS AND MINORS): Individual departments or programs have the right to determine how many online courses, within Rice or as transfer courses, may be counted for credit toward the major. Curricular decisions should reside under the jurisdiction of the departments subject to policies, resolutions and guidelines set down by the University, Committee on Undergraduate Curriculum, Graduate Council, Faculty Senate and the Registrar. However, careful consideration should be given to maintain a balance between online and in-person student contact in any given program of study.

TRANSFER CREDIT: Any “online course”, in the sense noted above, that is taken at another university should be approved according to existing rules for approving transfer credit, and follow the guidelines for transfer credit laid out in the Rice General Announcements, at both university and departmental levels. Individual departments may request further information from students to verify whether a course counts as an “online course” or not and whether its content, assessment and learning outcomes meet the requisite standards for consideration. It is a further recommendation of this working group that all departments should develop clear criteria for approving transfer credits, and that these criteria are made available to students in advance, so that students can plan their course of study.

SPECIAL PROGRAMS: Multi-disciplinary programs, professional masters programs, inter-institutional agreements and other multi-institutional partnerships that incorporate online courses should carefully define their requirements in keeping with the recommendations stated above.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES: The working group highly recommends that the following principles should be used to inform decisions at all levels about the development and adoption of online courses:

1. The syllabus should be clear about the nature of the course and the nature of interactions with the instructor during the course. This should also be reflected in the course description posted by the Registrar’s office.
2. The amount of work required for a given course should be comparable across delivery formats, and should be reflected in the number of credit hours assigned to a given course.
3. All courses on the same subject at the same level should offer comparable coverage of material independent of delivery method. Students in a given course should be able to pass the same level of exams regardless of delivery method.

4. Assignments, quizzes and exams should be equally rigorous across delivery methods and should allow for useful feedback from and interaction with the instructor.

5. All programs and schools should have a process in place to assess online courses, in order to ensure that the principles listed in bullets 1-4 above are being followed. The DEAC is available to provide feedback and possibly resources to facilitate the development and maintenance of online courses.

CONCLUDING STATEMENT: Rice faculty and teaching staff are adopting a wide variety of online content and approaches into their pedagogy. In defining policies that may impact or regulate these activities, it is crucial that the faculty senate recognize the importance of innovation in the classroom and the trend toward a richer use of online engagement while requiring that strict standards be adhered to, in keeping with a Rice education. The guidelines and recommendations in this report are designed to acknowledge the growing presence of online education at Rice, departmental governance of degree programs and the need for quality pedagogy that is independent of delivery method.
Charge 2: What are the goals of Rice Online and other online initiatives at Rice?

a) How are past and current activities working to achieve these goals? How have resources been allocated?

b) Summarize some key ways in which Rice faculty and programs are engaging online and highlight some notable accomplishments?

a) Rice Online’s Mission Statement:
Rice Online does not currently have a publicly posted mission statement, but rather has publicly posted its main goals are:

- to improve the quality of education at Rice University;
- to expand Rice University's reach and reputation
- to generate resources to support Rice University's core mission

b) What Rice Online does:
Rice Online consists of a wide range of online engagement involving a number of disciplines across campus. This is done through the development of MOOCs (Massively Open Online Courses), summer courses, college preparedness classes, special topics crash courses and graduate training courses.

Details about past and current activities in online education, as well as information about courses in production, can be found at online.rice.edu.

Resources are allocated via the solicitation, submission and review of proposals from interested faculty. The Digital Education Advisory Committee, which includes eight Rice faculty members from across campus and two administrators, is responsible for overseeing these resources and selecting high quality proposals for development. Details on available resources and the proposal application process can be found on the Rice Online website (http://online.rice.edu/rice-online-resources/).

Credit-bearing online courses have been restricted, to date, to a small number of summer courses:

- BIOC 300 - Paradigms in Biochemistry and Cell Biology
- COMP 130 - Elements of Algorithms
- ECON 100 - Principles of Economics
- SMGT 350 - Sport Ethics
- SMGT 362 - Sport Marketing

Over the last 2 summers (2015/16) a total of 86 students (19/67) have enrolled in these classes.
Charge 3: Investigate the way that online courses/digital content can potentially solve problems that Rice faces with its curriculum. (we note that digital content is widely used by faculty and students, and is not generated solely by Rice faculty, nor controlled by Rice policies)

a) Are there areas in which digital education provides a unique solution to Rice needs? For example, do online courses offer a potential solution to over-subscribed introductory classes?

b) What are the ways that online courses affect the Rice experience?

a) A number of examples exist in which online course can provide additional opportunities for Rice students and the Rice educational mission. These include:

- Study abroad: provide easy access to Rice curriculum for students taking a semester abroad
- Summer School: enables a richer array of courses
- Pre-matriculation classes: introductory classes to prepare students for more advanced classes after matriculating at Rice
- Additional sections of large over-subscribed classes: relieves some pressure for in-person classes
- “Accelerated” engagement: online courses could be used to "free up" in-class time for a more experiential learning focus, e.g. "online lecture" + "hands-on" activity in class
- Alternate scheduling of courses to accommodate the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) and other experiential learning

We envision a variety of ways in which online courses can enhance the Rice Experience, including increasing flexibility for students as well as reducing demand on introductory courses. In terms of increasing flexibility, students studying abroad and missing a required core course for their major could enroll in and complete the course online without having to sacrifice their time abroad. Students could also take summer school courses online to catch up on credits or to reduce course loads during the academic year. Finally, students engaged in experiential learning may have non-standard schedules, and the ability to take online courses would make these experiences more accessible. In terms of reducing demand on introductory courses, we may envision a system where students could take online pre-matriculation classes over the summer, such as popular introductory and prerequisite courses like PSYC 101. Similarly, an online section of a large, over-subscribed introductory course could provide an alternative for students unable to enroll, as well as a way for students enrolled in the traditional course to catch up on or review material. Reducing pressure on introductory classes will have a number of benefits for students, such as less anxiety about not being able to enroll in a needed course, as well as for faculty, such as releasing faculty from large introductory courses to teach more upper-level courses.


b) The increasing use of online course content naturally has an impact on the Rice Experience, predominantly by changing the nature of how faculty choose to engage with students. However, there are many different versions of the Rice Experience just as there are many
variants on the classroom experience. Any of the ways that online courses might enhance a
given student’s experience at Rice may also have negative effects on the experience of a
different student.

Potential negative impacts include:

- Less, real or perceived, access to professors
- Change of culture, with respect to active participation in class
- Increased demand on resources to provide quality online content
- Shift of limited resources from traditional pedagogy to online
- Increased pressure to accept outside credit for online courses

It is the recommendation of this working group that any future developments that significantly
change the prevalent approaches to teaching on campus should be attentive to the potential
for both positive and negative impacts on the Rice Experience.

It should be further noted that the impact of online education at Rice cannot be completely
defined by Rice activities or policies. External availability of high quality educational material
has the potential to impact the efficacy of online efforts at Rice as well as provide a wider
variety of options for our students.

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