

Resolution on Distance Education and Faculty Welfare

The faculty at UNC-Chapel Hill are well aware that their roles as educators extend beyond the walls of the University and indeed the boundaries of the State of North Carolina. To serve the needs of the growing numbers of non-traditional off-campus students, as well as traditional on-campus students, distance education instruction has become part of the normal range of pedagogical methods utilized by our faculty. Though it can be viewed as just one of several types of distance education methods, the increasing use of digitally-based distance education technologies has also become a significant force for change in the relationships between students, teachers and administrators. The Faculty Welfare Committee believes that a number of faculty welfare concerns are raised by these digitally-based technologies, including 1) changes in the status of faculty, 2) deterioration of the quality of instruction, and 3) and changes in the traditional concepts of ownership of intellectual property.

The following resolution is proposed in order to prompt a discussion of these issues by the faculty, with the goals of 1) maintaining the quality of our instructional efforts, both to on-campus students as well as the beneficiaries of distance education technologies, and 2) preserving the integrity of our roles as teachers and scholars.

Be it resolved that the Chair of the Faculty establish a task force whose charge would be to 1) evaluate the implications of distance learning on aspects of faculty welfare, and 2) report its findings and any recommendations with regard to this subject to Faculty Council.

Background information:

FACULTY STATUS: It is becoming common practice for institutions of higher education to employ part-time and contractual instructional personnel in distance education instruction. The problems that attend the status of part time and contractual instructional personnel generally should therefore be carefully considered in any assessment of distance education initiatives. These problems may include, among others, the decline or elimination of tenure, the erosion of salary structures and various employee benefits typically associated with full-time employment, and the weakening of faculty participation in institutional governance.

INSTRUCTIONAL CONDITIONS: Digitally based distance education technologies may have profound effects on instructional conditions. Potential effects on instructional workloads, expenses, and relationships should be carefully scrutinized.

Digitally based distance education technologies have the appearance of enabling greater economies of scale in instruction. At present, the evidence supporting this assumption is mixed. As a consequence, faculty should be attentive to whether the adoption of these technologies results in unreasonable increases in instructional workloads.

Institutional initiatives to develop the use of digitally based instructional technologies may also necessitate increasing instructional support costs to faculty, such as investment in computers and software. This may be a potentially significant employment expense, especially in light of the short cycle of obsolescence in digital technology development.

In addition to workload and expense concerns, the increased use of distance education methods – for both on- and off- campus students – radically alters the student/instructor relationship. This change may strain traditional norms, standards, and practices of academic work. Some areas of difficulty may be faculty/student contact (as asynchronous communication erodes traditional practices of "office hours" and "contact time"), issues of academic integrity (as new modes of instruction and fulfillment alter the range of practices subject to honor codes), and issues of performance standards (as new modes of teaching and learning strain traditional assessment standards).

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY: Among providers and purveyors of intellectual properties, discussion of the impact of digital technologies on intellectual property rights has generated a literature of enormous proportions. In the final analysis, the academic work of faculty is the production of intellectual properties. Faculty should be extremely careful to articulate how the disposition of intellectual property – including both research and instructional materials – is to be defined in terms of the conditions of both the production and distribution of such property.