

Offering Undergraduate Courses (or Sections of Courses) in an Online Format

Proposal to FSCUE from the FSCUE Curriculum Subcommittee

Background: We have received requests from the Department of Accountancy (WSOM), the Department of Nutrition (SOM), and the Case School of Engineering to offer undergraduate courses in an online format. Accountancy asked to offer ACCT 207: Excel Applications and Modeling only in an online format. Nutrition asked to offer a section of NTRN 201: Nutrition in an online format each fall and spring, in addition to in-class sections, and to offer the course only in an online format over the summer. The Case School of Engineering asked to offer ENGR 200: Statics and Strength of Materials only in an online format over the summer.

It has not been our practice to offer undergraduate courses online during the regular academic year (fall and spring semesters), though there are several exceptions of which we became aware during our discussions. We have regularly offered distance-learning in the summer for some CSE undergraduate courses, but in each case there has also been an in-class offering of the same course (see ENGR 145, ENGR 200, and ENGR 225 for Summer 2016).

By offering key courses in an online format, the proposals from Accountancy, Nutrition, and Engineering would break new ground, especially in light of our institutional commitment to a residential undergraduate program, so the topic was referred to the FSCUE Curriculum Subcommittee to review the issue and make a recommendation to FSCUE. The FSCUE Curriculum Subcommittee discussed the topic during Spring 2016 and Fall 2016.

Summary of the Discussion: The Curriculum Subcommittee sees this as a big question that it expects the Provost's Commission on the Undergraduate Experience (PCUE) to take up, but the group recognizes that PCUE discussions will take time and departments and schools need guidance in the meantime.

Members of the Subcommittee believe that research elsewhere has rendered a range of opinions on whether online courses perform as well as in-class and hybrid formats. While recognizing that there is a variety of motivations for offering courses in an online format (more on that below), one (sometimes hidden) motivation is the perception that offering a course online will reduce costs. There is a fear that departments will find that offering courses online is expensive and that quality might suffer in an effort to make them cost effective. There is also a concern about protecting the CWRU "brand" in terms of offering a residential experience. On the other hand, members of the Subcommittee recognize the benefits of experimenting with new formats, as well as the benefits in certain subjects of allowing students to move through material at their own pace. Members of the Subcommittee also recognize that we allow undergraduates to register for our own graduate courses taught in an online format, and some departments allow transfer credit for online courses taken at other institutions (though students are limited to no more than 15 credit-hours total of off-campus study after matriculation, except for study abroad).

Recommendations:

1. We should, for now, maintain a policy of not allowing courses to be taught completely in an online format during the regular academic year.

2. We should allow courses to be taught in a hybrid format with some degree of structured, in-person class interaction between students and the teaching staff throughout the semester. Some departments are already teaching courses using flipped classrooms, online modules supplemented by occasional class meetings, and other formats.
3. We should allow a course that is also offered during the regular academic year to be offered only in an online format during the summer, recognizing that some departments already allow students to take such courses from other institutions and the benefit of the student taking our course rather than a (not-so-?) close substitute for our course. This would allow us to compare outcomes across modes of instruction.
4. We should encourage consultation with [U]Tech and a community of practice when transitioning a course to an online or hybrid format. This can help determine whether the change appropriately addresses the reasons for the new format, establish quality control, and develop a framework for assessment of learning.

Jeffrey Wolcowitz, for the FSCUE Curriculum Subcommittee

Approved by FSCUE Curriculum Subcommittee, February 27, 2017