REPORT OF A REQUESTED FOCUSED VISIT FOR CHANGE

Advancement Section

TO

Central Michigan University
Mount Pleasant, Michigan

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The Higher Learning Commission
A Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools

EVALUATION TEAM

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A. Observations of Team Regarding Change Request

The request to expand learning opportunities through the delivery of programs in an online format is consistent with the mission of Central Michigan University. This reviewer was impressed with the comprehensive and candid analysis of the institution's capacity to mount these programs as presented in the change request document. The institution's long history in the offering of courses and programs to off-campus sites, has allowed planners to understand the needs of learners in remote locations and the challenges they face.

Based on all documents reviewed and information gathered in interviews during the on-site visit, approval of the change request is recommended. All of the challenges this new initiative presents for the institution were identified in the change request document. Suggestions to address some of these challenges are presented below.

B. Consultations of Team

1. Faculty Development. Many members of the CMU faculty on the Mount Pleasant campus have not taught online courses. A significant increase in the number of on-campus faculty who teach online courses is an important goal and can be achieved if they develop skills in the design and delivery of online courses, and if appropriate incentives are in place. Three excellent workshops are provided by the Center for Instructional Design and the Faculty Center for Innovative Teaching. While several regular faculty and adjunct instructors take advantage of these development opportunities, they are not required. A more efficient system for faculty development could be achieved if the salient contents of each of those workshops could be merged into one course that is required prior to the teaching of an instructor’s first online course.

2. Assessment. The plan for assessment of courses and programs appears sound and provides useful information for periodic review and revision. It was reported in the change request document and confirmed in interviews that the collection of data on learner outcomes is not consistently performed in all programs. Implementation of a pilot project using the WEAVE online system for outcomes reporting appears to have promise in promoting greater uniformity. If the use of this or another system can be expanded to include reports of actions that were taken as a consequence of the findings revealed through analysis of outcomes data, this would enable faculty and administrators to close the assessment loop. Student evaluations of courses and instructors provide very useful information to inform decisions for program and course revision as well. This appears to be working effectively for on-campus courses. It was noted, however, that the rate of return for these evaluations by online students is only 33%, which raises serious questions about the validity of the data collected. The implementation of a policy that would require students to complete evaluations should be considered. Withholding distribution of grades until
the evaluation is completed might be one incentive that could be employed, but perhaps there are others that would be equally effective.

3. **Incentives for Online Faculty.** The percentage of regular CMU faculty members who teach online courses remains low (32%). If this trend continues, it could lead to some of the same issues related to the lack of integration between on- and off-campus operations that were problematic in the mid-90's. Several appropriate strategies have been attempted or are being planned to increase the involvement of regular CMU faculty in online teaching. To strengthen financial incentives for faculty and departments to develop and deliver courses and programs, a different financial model, “New Ventures”, has been implemented in selected programs. In this plan ProfEd returns 60% of tuition revenue to colleges and departments where online courses are offered. This approach seems a good fit for the institution-wide decentralized budgeting model that has been in place since 1998. It may also be necessary to raise the stipend paid to faculty for the development of online courses.

There are three other factors that appear to limit the involvement of regular CMU faculty in online teaching. First, most of them teach online courses outside their normal teaching load. If they are to meet their other obligations in scholarship and service, it is difficult for them to find the time to teach online courses as an additional assignment. Secondly, the definition of scholarship may have to be broadened to include the design and testing of approaches to online learning as a recognized form of research. Finally, with rare exception, online courses are limited to an eight week format which places a heavy demand on faculty time. Several of the faculty members interviewed noted that they would be more willing to teach online if courses could be taught over the entire semester.

4. **Intellectual Property Rights.** Steps are being taken to resolve some of the problems in clearly defining policies related to intellectual property rights as they apply to online learning. It was clear however, that more needs to be done. Working with the CMU office of legal counsel, the institution should consider the appointment of a consultant from another university with a strong record in online instruction.

As a result of the establishment of ProfEd as a service unit rather than a separate academic college, the institution has made great strides to ensure that learner outcomes in on- and off-campus courses are identical. Greater involvement of on-campus faculty in the teaching of online courses is a critical step in the building of a culture where all understand that the degree awarded, whether on the Mount Pleasant campus or in distant locations is viewed by all as a degree from Central Michigan University.