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Online Learning Plan

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Sierra Pacific Community College District

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# Purpose of This Plan

The Online Learning Task Force was formed in February 2008 to develop an Online Learning Strategic Plan for the Sierra Pacific Community College District. This plan incorporates the work done by a district-wide group over the last two years regarding the future of online learning within the three-college district and lays a foundation for the future of online learning (OL)[[1]](#footnote-1) at Sierra Pacific.

# Definition of Online Learning Modes

All OL modes offered at Sierra Pacific will be considered in the plan. Currently, these include the following: online, hybrid, and television or tele-web.

**Online course**—An online course is a course that is offered over the Internet. Typically, content is presented through web pages and class discussions using a combination of email, mailing lists, bulletin boards, chat rooms, or newsgroups. All class meetings, assignments, lectures, and assessments are online (except for orientation meetings or other face-to-face examinations as determined by the professor).

**Hybrid course**—A hybrid course is a course that is taught online using similar web-based tools and activities as an online class. Some portion of the course meeting time is conducted online, and the remaining percentage of the class is conducted in a traditional classroom.

**Television or Tele-Web course**—This type of course uses cable TV to deliver some or all of the course content. A tele-web course merges online and TV delivery. Typically, only a limited number of face-to-face meetings are held, and the remainder of the course is conducted using television delivery of content, web-based activities, communication, and discussion.

**Web-Enhanced course[[2]](#footnote-2)**—This type of course is taught face-to-face for 100 percent of the course meeting time, but classroom assignments and materials are supplemented with web-based activities. Examples are: online projects, handouts and materials, online discussion, or online testing.

# Planning Process

A broadly constituted OL Task Force has been working since February 2008. The Task Force has produced a draft OL Strategic Plan and forwarded it to the Planning Coordination Council (PCC). The recommendations of the OL Task Force were forwarded to the Academic Senate, Classified Senate, IT Committee, Budget Committee and the Curriculum Committee, and these groups were asked to respond to the draft document. This input was then reviewed by the PCC. The Draft Strategic Plan was sent back to the Task Force which has now revised the draft based on feedback, updated it with current information, and prioritized the recommendations.

## How are Courses and Programs Selected for Online Learning Delivery?

The Sierra Pacific Curriculum Committee has a stringent approval process for requests to teach OL courses. The decisions about which courses to present to the Curriculum Committee are made by departments/divisions based on their own criteria and procedures. It is common that this decision is based solely on the enthusiasm of an individual faculty member who has an interest in teaching a course online, as a hybrid or via TV. Despite a large increase in OL offerings, this method of selecting courses has not helped to ensure that entire degrees or certificates are available by distance modes. Departments and divisions are now beginning to think more intentionally about how to increase their distance offerings.

## Leadership/Management of Online Learning

The responsibility for OL is becoming more focused at Sierra Pacific. Lines of communication about OL courses and programs begin at the department and area level, with department chairs and deans sharing different portions of decision-making about OL issues. Specific funding allocated to OL and resources used to support OL come now through IT and Professional Development funds. Currently there are other funding sources that could be utilized to support OL, but there has been no strategic planning in the past to include OL in resource distribution.

# Where Are We Now With Online Learning?

Sierra Pacific was a pioneer in online education and was one of the first community colleges in California to offer fully online courses in 1997. However, over the next few years there was limited growth in online offerings and only 15 course sections were taught online during Fall 2000. The adoption of a learning management system (LMS) in Spring 2001, the availability of training to teach online, and recruitment of new faculty interested in teaching online resulted in a rapid increase in online offerings.

## Online Learning Offerings and Programs

In Fall 2012, Sierra Pacific had 565 fully-online course sections. This represents a growth rate of 796 percent over the last six years. There have also been televised courses offered at Sierra Pacific. However, these have decreased over the last five years. In Fall 2015, there were only three TV course sections offered at Sierra Pacific. However, it is important to note that OL courses now only account for approximately 12 percent of all course sections at Sierra Pacific. There has also been intense growth in web-enhanced classes and these are likely to be a robust source for OL courses over the next few years. There are currently over 1200 courses sections using LMS each semester (combined online, hybrid, and web-enhanced).

Sierra Pacific Community College District currently has no complete degree programs being offered entirely by distance methods, but there are several certificate programs which are available online. At least one course in each General Education area has been approved for online learning delivery, but not all these courses are currently being offered. There are other graduation requirements that cannot currently be met through online learning methods.

## What student support services are currently available to online learning students?

The OL Task Force developed a matrix of services that are currently available by email, online or by phone so that they can be utilized by OL students. However, this matrix is incomplete and will need to be updated before it can be used to determine which additional services will be needed to support students as our OL offerings increase in the future.

## How are faculty members trained to teach online, hybrid or web-enhanced courses?

In the absence of any district-wide guidelines or standards, Sierra Pacific developed its own standards for online instructors in 2009. The current Guidelines for Online Instruction require that instructors complete the Sierra Pacific Online Teaching Institute offered at the Instructional Technology Center or an equivalent program of preparation before teaching a fully-online course. Over 390 faculty members have attended the Online Teaching Institute offered at the ITC. A few faculty members have completed similar programs at other colleges. Others have completed the one-unit online course offered at Sierra Pacific (Online Studies 300—Teaching Online), which is also recommended as part of the Online Teaching Institute certificate to gain experience as an online student.

## What tech support services are available for faculty, staff and students?

The ITC has trained and supported over 240 instructors to teach online courses or web-enhance their courses in the past five years. This has resulted in very rapid growth in online, hybrid and web-enhanced courses at Sierra Pacific. Each semester course sites need to be created or copied. The ITC supports over 760 courses per semester. Within the district, this is almost twice as many courses and instructors as other colleges. In addition to faculty support, over 18,000 students need to be linked to these sites. Many of these students come in, call or email the ITC for help and support. The ITC has created the district-wide LMS Help website which includes written instructions, tutorials, and video demonstrations.

Although this support site is available district-wide, it has been updated and maintained solely by the ITC for the last five years. The district does provide a general Help Desk which provides support for students Monday through Friday from 7:30 am to 5:30 pm. However, most OL students are active in their courses during evenings and weekends when there is no technical support available. Also, the district Help Desk does not provide support to faculty. In June 2009, the district purchased 24/7 Help Desk services from a vendor. However, the staff who provide these services for the vendor are often inadequately trained so many items get escalated to the college support staff, especially faculty support questions.

## What research is there about how our online students compare with in-class students?

A report generated by Sierra Pacific Research Office in February 2015 provides some interesting information on our online courses and the students enrolled in them over the last five years.

* Online courses have 26 percent more female students than male students.
* All ethnic groups appear to be represented in the Sierra Pacific online student population.
* The online student population has a higher proportion of returning students, and the 18-20-year-old students are under-represented.
* The number of part-time students taking online courses has increased relative to full-time students over the last five years. Over one-third of OL students are now taking six units or less.
* Over 90 percent of the courses offered in the last six years were transfer level courses and 55 percent of online students taking online courses stated transfer to a four-year college was their goal.
* In the last six years, the largest proportion of OL courses was offered through CIS, English, and Library/Learning Resource Center. However, over 25 disciplines currently offer online courses.
* The overall success rate for online classes is 72 percent compared to 69.5 percent for traditional classes, which is not a significant difference.
* Grade distributions in online courses are only slightly different from traditional classes. There are more A grades and slightly higher withdrawals. Additional analysis shows that students who do well online are also achieving similar grades in their face-to-face classes.
* When post-course assessments for all modes of delivery are available, it will be possible to confirm whether equivalent learning has occurred.

1. Online learning is referred to as OL throughout this report [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is a non-OL course that uses OL tools [↑](#footnote-ref-2)