New York University
Faculty Committee on the Future of Technology-Enhanced Education
and
Undergraduate Academic Affairs Committee

Joint Advisory on Policies regarding Online Courses

Spring 2017

Background

In fall 2016, Provost Katherine Fleming charged two all-University standing committees, the Faculty Committee on the Future of Technology-Enhanced Education (FTEE) and the Undergraduate Academic Affairs Committee (UAAC), with reviewing NYU schools’ policies regarding online courses. Given the priority that the University has placed on technology-enhanced education, Provost Fleming asked the two committees to advise both her and the individual schools on the appropriateness of policies that restrict students from taking courses based on the format in which they are taught.

This issue was previously addressed by the ad hoc FTEE Committee (which preceded the current standing committee) in its Final Report of June 2014. In that report, the committee espoused the view that “faculty should be permitted and encouraged to experiment with instructional technologies in their teaching” (p. 18). It acknowledged, however, that “most teaching takes place within a program, department, or school, where the overall design and sequencing of the curriculum is the result of collective decision making and subject to faculty governance in the form of departmental and school-wide curricular committees and faculty ratification” (p. 18). With this in mind, the group urged schools’ curriculum committees to “consider whether and how, in the service of experimentation and student circulation, thoughtful adjustments might be made to existing academic policies governing student course work” (p. 20).

Since that time, the number of online courses at NYU has increased dramatically. (This semester, for example, 595 courses are being taught online.) Their visibility to students has also been enhanced by an “Instructional Mode” filter that was added to Albert, which allows students to search for online, blended, and in-person courses across the University. One factor contributing to this increase in activity is the hiring of school-based instructional technologists, which began in AY 2014-15 with financial support from the Provost’s Office, and which has enabled communities of practice to develop within the schools.

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1 The filter relies on a taxonomy of instructional modes (in-person, blended, and online) that was approved in spring 2015 by the University’s Teaching Technology Committee. In all three categories, the required student work may involve engagement with online materials or platforms. But what distinguishes them from one another is the degree to which active instruction (as opposed to student work) happens in an online format—for example, in an “online” course, 100 percent of the required instructional time happens online, while zero percent happens online in an “in-person” course; anything in between should be categorized as a “blended” course.
Observations

In reviewing current policies at NYU, the two committees observed that only a few schools still have restrictions in place regarding online courses. For the most part, these date back several years and were implemented at a time when online courses were offered almost exclusively by for-profit institutions. Over time, however, some restrictions that originally applied only to transfer credits were adopted for courses taken at other NYU schools.

The committees note five major problems with the existing restrictions:

(1) With regard to transfer credits, the reality is that NYU schools are already (and unknowingly) accepting credits for online courses, since most institutions—including NYU—do not indicate on the transcript whether a course was taken online.

(2) The blanket rejection of online courses assumes a correlation between the quality and modality of instruction. But at many institutions (including NYU), faculty are actually choosing to incorporate instructional technologies to improve teaching and learning by increasing their interaction with students and by enhancing student engagement in their courses. Policies or practices that completely restrict students from taking or transferring in fully online courses may therefore reflect a lack of familiarity with the possibilities that online tools afford both faculty and students.

(3) Prohibitions on students’ taking online courses in other NYU schools indirectly inhibit faculty innovation in teaching. As the ad hoc FTEE Committee stressed in its Final Report, innovation in teaching should not only be permitted but also encouraged.²

(4) Schools are increasingly developing online courses and programs in order to meet a number of important institutional goals—not only risk mitigation and revenue enhancement, but also affordability; equity, diversity, and inclusion; and student circulation across the global network. Policies or practices against online courses may hinder schools’ ability to achieve such goals.

(5) Finally, since any course taught online must be reviewed and approved (like all courses) by the sponsoring school’s curriculum committee, the restrictive policies currently in place are inconsistent with the “full faith and credit” agreement that courses taken at any NYU school should count towards overall degree requirements. (This is particularly relevant to undergraduate programs, where there is more cross-school student circulation than at the graduate level.)

² Faculty Committee on the Future of Technology-Enhanced Education at NYU, Final Report, June 2014; p. 18
Recommendations

The FTEE Committee and the UAAC affirm that the prerogative to offer or not offer online or blended courses and programs should remain within the individual schools and their existing mechanisms for faculty governance over the curriculum. But courses in all instructional modes should, in principle, be accessible to NYU students if they wish to take them, even if certain course formats are only available outside their home school. With this in mind, and for all the compelling reasons noted above, both committees strongly urge schools to work through their governance structures to remove any blanket bans on online courses that they may have in place.

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3 This is consistent with appropriate limits that certain schools place on cross-school registration (e.g., restricting access to particular graduate and professional programs). Academic advising will also play a role in ensuring that students take online courses in appropriate circumstances. (It may not, e.g., be appropriate for students at NYU Shanghai to take online engineering courses offered by Tandon, when similar courses are offered in person on their own home campus.)

4 If schools have questions or concerns about the quality of online teaching and learning at NYU, they should be encouraged to consult with the FTEE Committee, which has expertise in this area and can connect them, as needed, to the relevant University units.