

FFA

BARGAINING ISSUES

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Online Courses

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The [previous contract](#) addressed online courses only briefly within the context of intellectual property rights. Since then, [the number of online sections](#) has exploded. Now is the time for the faculty and administration teams to begin what will obviously be a long-term conversation about online learning at Ferris.

Where We Stand

To ensure the academic integrity of online offerings, your FFA bargaining team has proposed that the faculty group (e.g., department, program, or discipline) decide whether an existing or new course will be offered online. The administration team has rejected this proposal and says it has no interest in further discussion.

This position is surprising given the administration's avid interest in discussing online courses everywhere **except** at the bargaining table. There are any number of teams, task forces, and committees at every level devoted to discussing various facets of online learning.

So why does the administration bargaining team decline to talk about these issues? Because "scheduling matters" are solely an administrative function and "the administration needs control."

Pedagogy = Faculty Responsibility

The decision whether to offer a course or program online is not "scheduling." It's a significant pedagogical and curricular issue involving questions that are the traditional and rightful province of the faculty. For example:

- Are the available online teaching technologies and methods appropriate to help students achieve course outcomes?
- Are the course content and activities compatible with online delivery?
- How might existing course design, content, activities, assignments, and assessments need to change to help students achieve course outcomes in the online setting?
- How might offering this course online affect students' ability to achieve broader program or general education outcomes?
- How might offering this course online affect the program curriculum? How will it affect the viability of traditional face-to-face sections?

We believe faculty members with expertise in the relevant discipline and its pedagogy are best qualified to answer these questions and make choices that preserve educational quality and student learning.

Quantity or Quality?

The administration's main interests when discussing online learning seem to be demand and capacity rather than quality. [President Eisler believes](#) "we should grow as much as we are capable of doing well," with the emphasis on "grow." Departments are under pressure to offer more and more online sections and are asked to consider whether their programs can be offered in fully-online versions.

The administration's focus on "more" over "better" was also illustrated last year when an Academic Affairs online course cap task force, largely composed of experienced online instructors, recommended that individual departments set an appropriate cap for each course by considering a number of key pedagogical issues.

The administration responded by insisting that, to be financially worthwhile, online sections simply needed higher caps (or cheaper "instruction," i.e., faculty compensation). Provost Erickson then circulated a document spitballing a system of essentially paying online instructors by the student. Such an approach would create a financial incentive to overfill courses and encourage faculty to use whatever teaching tools permit the most efficient delivery of information to a mass audience rather than selecting them based on how well they help students learn.

Learning Matters Most

Faculty recognize that some students prefer online courses for a variety of reasons, and we want them to have a range of educationally sound learning options. However, online instructors hear many students comment about feeling forced into taking online sections, whether by geography, lack of face-to-face sections, or other factors. On-campus students are sometimes unwillingly moved into online sections when the administration closes a less fully enrolled in-person section of a required class. What about these students' needs?

Acceding recklessly to a perceived demand for online sections at maximum capacity reflects an administration vision of Ferris where more is, by definition, better -- and where faculty concerns about the quality of education and long-held principles of shared governance are trumped by the administration's desire for control.

The FFA team's proposal to let experienced, expert faculty decide whether a course should be offered online reflects the faculty's belief that pedagogical decisions must be driven not primarily by demand, or capacity, or SCH production -- but first and foremost by the most important priority of all: student learning.

(Note: if you're reading the paper version of this newsletter, you may view the links via the electronic copy posted at ffaonline.org).