General Comments

The recommendations put forth in this report are important steps towards establishing the centrality of online learning at URI. Many are already being implemented and so provide good starting point for support and discussion among the URI community and administration.

Recommendations In Progress

Establish an Institute for Online and Distance Learning

There has been significant progress toward this goal. There is a new Office of Online and Distance Learning (OODL); an Interim Director is in place and plans are in place for a permanent director who will oversee both OODL and Student Learning Outcomes, Assessment, and Accreditation (SLOAA). The new office is connected by the common thread of teaching and learning to the Instructional Development Program (IDP), SLOAA, and the Instructional Technology Center. These four offices collectively represent a network of faculty support for the advancement of teaching and learning. Explicit faculty support for online and distance pedagogical development and use of classroom technology in teaching are the new components. A search for a second Sakai support person is underway. We have a new teaching laboratory for faculty, supported by the Champlin Foundation.

Distance Learning has been a successful revenue source, especially for night and summer classes. But overall revenue potential of online learning at URI is not well understood. Investment in online learning should have a desirable Cost/Benefit ratio. Although online courses have been taught primarily through CCE, this new effort will be an integrated effort.

Establishment of An Online and Distance Learning Committee

An Online and Distance Learning Committee, comprised of faculty and administration, is necessary to monitor progress, provide guidance, and develop policies for implementation and a joint ad hoc committee has been formed. Once a permanent director is hired, the committee will be formalized and legislation will be presented to the Faculty Senate to establish the permanent committee. The reporting structure will involve both the Faculty Senate and the Office of the Provost.

Establishment of Policies by the Online and Distance Learning Committee

The Faculty Senate has a policy on online courses that was adopted by the CAC on March 27, 2006. The Online and Distance Learning Committee will work with the CAC to revise current policies and develop new ones as necessary. Policies will continue to
focus on relevancy to course structures and content, faculty teaching assignments, and expectations of students. As well, they will be designed to promote a high quality online learning experience, a critical factor in encouraging future development and moving URI toward becoming a leader in online learning.

Recommendations in Need of Faculty Involvement

Engage Faculty to Develop Strategic Online and Distance Learning
Engaging the faculty is critical for strengthening the role of online learning at URI as outlined in the Academic Plan. The task force recommends a graduated approach to online readiness, designed to promote online learning across various disciplines and within different groups of faculty. Since most ‘early adopters’ among the faculty are already active in online learning, expanding faculty involvement might be challenging. Faculty support and training to use the technology is the most important factor to success. Support needs to be provided in developing both blended and 100% online courses. The task force subcommittee recognizes that blended courses are not necessarily a preparation step for 100% online teaching. Blended courses have their own legitimacy because some content is better delivered face to face, while other content or discussion is better suited to an online environment. Blended courses constitute a format critical for advancing the online initiative. Currently, online courses need to be approved through the CAC, but there is no similar requirement for blended courses. Davis Educational Foundation money is available to support faculty development through the Online Fellows Programs.

Additional considerations include the application of online learning during J-term and summer sessions. Solutions to challenges need to be explored such as giving exams. Face-to-face exams could be accomplished by using real-time oral (online) exams.

URI’s Expectations of Students
Students should be well informed about the technology requirements of online courses. Input from students could be useful in determining the need to offer short courses (training) for students in online styles. Some form of standardized formatting might help students move easily from course to course.

Student Learning and Assessment
Assessment is important to developing and maintaining high quality online teaching. Traditionally, there has been no formal evaluation structure for online teaching. With growing availability and use of online and distance learning, evaluation becomes increasingly important. Once developed, the administration of evaluation is less expensive than traditional face-to-face methods but response rates for online evaluations tend to be low. The committee needs to work through concepts. Blended courses need special consideration, for example, whether or not exams should be administered face-to-face. IDEA-SRIs can be altered to evaluate the course separately from the instructor. Pilot experiments might be undertaken to determine if there are differences between face-to-face, blended, and totally online offerings. Resources could be allocated for this experimentation (Davis Educational Foundation grant).
**Develop Workload Guidelines and Gain Faculty Commitment**

Guidelines for developing courses are well established. Additionally, there should be guidelines to assist faculty throughout the semester. Instructors need a good understanding of what is expected of them and how to create a regular presence throughout the course. Consideration needs to be given to whether an instructor can teach an online course as part of a regular teaching assignment, or only as an overload/summer assignment; and to limits of the number of online courses one could teach each semester. Currently, online courses are offered only through CCE, typically in a 10-week format. Flexibility might be worth considering. Since delay due to access to technology is no longer an impediment, a 5-week format might be suitable for certain courses.

**Distance Learning Class Size**

The task force recommends that “faculty teaching in a distance learning environment must develop familiarity with distance pedagogy prior to teaching their first course in this modality.” A short course is recommended. For revenue enhancement, online courses would realistically have to have more than 20-25 students. Many face-to-face classes have more than 25 students but there is the potential for a loss of revenue if these are transferred to an online format. However, blended courses may accommodate a larger class size, giving students quality experiences for work online that they could not do in a large lecture class.

**Intellectual Property**

Refer to university legal counsel or consult with CCRI as they have a more advanced online program than URI.

**Recommendations in Need of Resources**

**Communicate Clearly Course Offerings, Programs, and Certificates**

This recommendation involves the development by Enrollment Services of an e-campus system that clearly identifies course offerings as online, blended, or face-to face during the registration process. This may be expensive to implement in the short run but would be beneficial in the long run. Catalog changes would also be required.

**Establishment of a University-wide Technology Team**

When major changes are proposed (e.g., possible changes in the Course Management System or upgrades), effective communication, planning, and coordination is essential between the technology team and the Online Teaching and Distance Learning Advisory group.

**Financial Resources**

Costs and revenues need to be evaluated. The number of staff support will add significantly to the expense to the University and should be added gradually.