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Re: Distance Learning & dual credits

December 15, 2007

Dear Education and Local Government Committee:

I was unable to attend your meeting yesterday, but listened to the discussion from my office in Great Falls. Various legislators made comments or asked questions about “quality assurance” mechanisms in distance-delivered or dual-credit courses, and wondered whether teacher licensure truly is the only assurance of quality instruction that the public has. It isn't. There are at least four other indicators of quality instruction:

- **Documents (typically, syllabi) describing the content of the course, the intended learning outcomes, and the methods of assessment.** These documents are routinely used by school administrators to determine whether a home school course, a correspondence course, or a course from another school district/college meets the local school district's graduation requirements. We two-year colleges also routinely convene high school and college faculty to compare syllabi in order to determine whether certain high school courses are comparable enough to ours to award “Tech Prep” credit in our programs. I don't like it as the sole mechanism for quality assurance, but it's a crucial one in the dual-credit context.
- **Faculty supervision and evaluation.** Licensure assures the public that the teacher has received a certain level of preparation to teach, but there is no substitute for sustained supervision and evaluation of faculty to ensure that the teacher is performing well. In the dual-credit environment, when colleges and school districts establish expectations for evaluation in advance, the interests of both sectors in quality instruction can be addressed.
- **Regional accreditation.** As noted in yesterday's meeting, Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities continually establishes guidelines for quality in both curriculum and instruction, including faculty qualification and the quality of distance-delivered instruction. As an example, in its most recent re-accreditation, MSU – Great Falls was commended for the quality of its distance-delivered programming, including the preparation of faculty and monitoring of outcomes.
- **Outcomes assessment.** Probably the best indicator of quality is the assessment of student learning. As an example, the Advanced Placement program of the College Board has devised a number of examinations that are so rigorous and reliable that colleges throughout the country award college credit solely on the basis of students' performance on these exams. Someone stated yesterday that students get college credit for AP courses; that's not precisely true. The courses

help prepare the students for the AP examination, but it's students' performance on the test that determines whether they get college credit. If the students' scores are high, they get credit; if the scores are not high enough, they don't. Interestingly, colleges do not examine or make any requirements for the credentials of the high school teacher of the AP course, the syllabus of the course, or the accreditation status of the high school.

There are other ways to use grades and other measures of performance to ensure quality. At MSU – Great Falls, we monitor the performance of students in our distance-delivered courses to ensure that the distribution of grades (and student satisfaction ratings) compares well with the distribution in our face-to-face courses. We also monitor how tests are constructed and graded when a high school teacher teaches a dual-credit course for us in the high school setting to high school students only, to ensure that testing and grading in the course measure college-level outcomes.

In short, a number of factors assure the public of the quality of instruction in a particular course. Teacher licensure assures the public that the teacher has had a certain level of expertise at the K-12 level, just as established minimum qualifications do at the college level. That assurance is important, but it is not in itself the assurance of quality instruction. Depending on the circumstance (e.g., transfer of course work, “Tech Prep,” advanced placement, and dual credit), one or more of the other indicators may suffice – and historically *have* sufficed.

In the case of dual-credit courses, whether delivered online or not, I believe there must be a rational blend of some or all of the above quality assurance indicators from both sectors, since the course is a college course being counted for high school credit, as well as college credit. The changes to the distance learning rule did not provide that rational blend or even consider them, probably because the major providers of dual-credit online were not included on the task force developing the proposed changes. In the absence of that expertise, the task force simply imposed one quality assurance mechanism that usually applies (teacher licensure) to a circumstance where it is not the best measure of quality and doesn't really apply.

Imposing high school licensure requirements on college faculty will diminish the number of college faculty interested in teaching dual-credit courses and will diminish the experience itself for high school students. The best dual-credit experience is one in which high school students experience a real college course, in a class with other college students, a college teacher, and college-level content and expectations. Montana kids deserve the best dual-credit experience – and the online option makes it available to all Montana kids

Thank you for your interest in these matters. If I have not been clear or can provide you with additional information, don't hesitate to contact me directly.

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