



## The University of Wyoming Requests Change in Affiliation Status with the Commission

### OFFICIAL CHANGE REQUEST

(Core Components 1a, 1b, 5b, 5c)

“I’m an adventurous media consumer, but many of my students feel challenged when they simply participate openly in threaded discussions. Future students will undoubtedly embrace a wider array of tools in their learning and their daily lives. I’ll be there, a step ahead, ready to stretch them as I did those who came before them.”

—Debra Beck, Area Coordinator of Public Relations, College of Education, co-founder of the University of Wyoming’s Snowy Range Nonprofit Institute, and an online instructor

As noted frequently throughout the self-study, outreach and service to the people of Wyoming is a critical part of the university mission. The university has delivered degree programs away from the main campus for decades. (1a) Given the depth of its experience in creating, managing, and assessing distance-delivered courses and programs, the university is requesting a change in affiliation status with the Commission in order to have greater flexibility as we respond to the learning needs of site-bound students. (5c) The ability to respond to learners’ needs is especially important since the University of Wyoming is the only public baccalaureate and graduate degree-granting institution in Wyoming.

Currently the University of Wyoming has a Stipulation on Affiliation Status regarding approval of distance degree programs:

Prior Commission approval required for distance education programs other than the BS in Business Administration, BS in Family and Consumer Sciences (Professional Child Development Option), the RN/BSN completion program, MS in Education (Specialization in Instructional Technology), MS in Nursing (Nurse Educator option), and Executive MBA.

The University of Wyoming requests a change in this stipulation, specifically a *change in educational offerings* as specified in **policy 3.2(d)2**, such that no Commission approval is required for distance education program offerings.

An altered affiliation status would not change the university’s mission; instead, it would allow greater flexibility in realizing that mission. The University of Wyoming, like many institutions, has a rapidly increasing enrollment in its distance programs. Many of the students in these distance programs are older adults, single parents, and individuals with jobs and families, and a majority of the students in distance programs are women. These students reflect the changing demographics of university students nationwide, but they also reflect challenges of the sparsely populated mountain west, where long distances can leave citizens isolated from opportunities for university-level learning. (1b)

The Outreach School is charged with the delivery of degree programs to site-bound students. The Outreach School pursues partnerships with the university’s academic units and the state’s community colleges, among others, in order to facilitate the delivery of programs and to foster the sustainability of those already delivered. (5b) The granting of this change in affiliation status will permit the Outreach School and its partners more flexibility in their response to the learning needs of the university’s constituents across Wyoming and beyond. In addition to fostering innovation, this change in affiliation status may allow for increased outreach enrollment and thus more access to higher education for learners.

## CONTEXT AND REASONS FOR THE CHANGE REQUEST

### (Core Components 2d, 5a, 5b)

There are a number of reasons why the University of Wyoming is proposing this change, all based on the principle that distance learning is essential to the statewide mission of the university. The university takes seriously its responsibility to serve the entire state. The small but dispersed Wyoming population means that it is a fiscally sound strategy to support instructional sites to provide access to baccalaureate and graduate degree programs to learners statewide. (5a) The university has also integrated its mission of service to the state into its academic planning processes. (2d) It has good partnerships with the state’s community colleges, which foster distance delivery in a number of ways. (5b) The university has a long history of distance delivery and has experience with a variety of distance technologies. It structures the relationship between its outreach delivery units and the academic departments and colleges in a manner that ensures program rigor and quality. Finally, the university has made great strides in its distance delivery of student support services.

### Academic planning

#### (Core Component 2d)

The university’s commitment to distance delivery of degree programs is reflected in its academic planning. Academic Plan II contained a number of action items related to distance delivery of courses, including permanent support for faculty outreach positions, the move to a single online course platform, a commitment to the sharing of courses and degrees with outside groups such as WICHE, and a heightened commitment to the exploration and assessment of effective pedagogies for distance learning. The commitment in AP II reflected a continuation of the university’s first academic plan’s focus on outreach, where

the integration of the university's core faculty into outreach instruction was a central planning theme. (2d)

Educational outreach and distance delivery continue to be an area of focus in the current plan, UP 3. Action items involve the development of a statewide curricular outreach project, to be planned in consultation with the state's community colleges, a focus on the space needs for the Outreach School as it serves the state, and the technological infrastructure necessary for the implementation of best practices in distance delivery. (2d)

## **Partnerships with Wyoming community colleges**

**(Core Components 5a, 5b, 5c)**

In providing distance-delivered degree opportunities, the university partners effectively with Wyoming's seven community colleges to offer academic programs to Wyoming learners, with the community colleges providing the first two years of degree programs and the university providing upper division and graduate courses for students to meet baccalaureate and graduate requirements. (5a, 5b) The Outreach School has space on all of the community college campuses for audio and video conference rooms and office space for Outreach personnel. In addition, the Outreach School has classroom space in smaller community college satellite sites around the state. Academic coordinators across the state help to recruit and advise students, in addition to informing them of student support services that are available at a distance from the university. Under the terms of the cooperative agreements that the university has with the community colleges, university students can access support services on some of the community college campuses. These good relations have proven vital in helping the Outreach School serve student needs. In addition, the university also conducts a statewide needs assessment periodically to determine student needs and how to best meet those needs. (5c)

## **University experience with distance delivery and maintenance of its quality**

**(Core Components 2c, 3a, 3d)**

The University of Wyoming has been involved in distance learning since it began offering correspondence courses early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Distance degree programs are delivered by the university through a variety of media, which have evolved with technological change, but which also aim to serve even the most remote learners. Some delivery methods are synchronous, such as teleconferencing and video conferencing. Other delivery methods are asynchronous, including correspondence, online, streaming audio and video, podcasting, and Web conferencing tools. Many classes are now offered in a hybrid format, with a variety of delivery methods utilized in order to provide the best learning environments for students.

The university is structured to ensure the integrity and quality of its educational programs offered at a distance. (3d) The foundation of this structure is the principle that the academic units that teach the outreach curriculum are precisely those that teach the Laramie-based curriculum. The Outreach School has been given responsibility for delivering

several degree programs statewide and has a commitment to offering programs rather than unconnected courses. The academic aspects of distance programs are controlled by academic departments and colleges. The curricula of distance degree programs are the same as university programs offered on the main campus and are determined by colleges and departments. The faculty teaching in distance programs are either regular university academic personnel or are approved by the appropriate academic departments to teach outreach courses. Assessment of distance delivered courses and programs occurs within the academic department assessment processes to ensure distance efforts are meeting the same learning outcomes and goals as on-campus courses and programs. (2c, 3a) The Outreach School conducts student evaluations of distance technology and course delivery effectiveness each semester for every distance-delivered course. The Outreach School also administers a biannual evaluation of the quality of service provided by Outreach School regional academic centers. That evaluation includes respondents from the community colleges. The Outreach School dean also serves as an associate provost for academic affairs. This ensures that outreach programs are well represented in university decision-making. The dean is also a member of the university Deans Council and Executive Council.

### **Student support services at a distance**

(Core Components 2c, 4d, 5a, 5b)

Library support for distance degree programs is long-standing and effective. Coe Library has made a strong institutional commitment to serve learners at a distance, including the creation of library positions charged with outreach service development and support. (4d) Student support services for distance students have improved significantly since the last accreditation visit. This has been and continues to be an area of institutional focus, as evidenced by UP 3 Action Item 11. Also, as previously described, many outreach students can access some student support services offered at the state's community colleges, under the terms of the cooperative agreements the university has with those institutions. (5b)

With the implementation of the Banner student information system database, processes for enrollment services for both on-campus and outreach students were carefully reviewed. The services include those associated with the offices of the registrar, student financial aid, admissions, and the financial services business office. In addition, a comprehensive review of support services for outreach students was conducted over the last few years by the Outreach School and the Division of Student Affairs. (2c) Support has been expanded to deliver relevant Laramie campus support services to outreach students. These include the Writing Center services, supplemental instruction, academic and career advising, counseling, leadership and civic engagement opportunities, and admission and transfer of credit processes. (5a)

### **Approvals for the change request**

The University of Wyoming has long experience with the effective offering of degree programs, has a statewide mission, and desires to continue to offer degree programs to meet student demand. In short, the university has the experience, the structures, and the

processes in place to responsibly determine what degree programs should be offered at a distance. For those reasons, this change request has been approved by the provost and vice president for academic affairs, the president, and the Board of Trustees. No approvals external to the university beyond the HLC are necessary for this change request.

## **POSSIBLE IMPACT ON AREAS IDENTIFIED AS CHALLENGES IN THE LAST COMPREHENSIVE VISIT**

Chapter 3 addresses the areas of concern noted by the Higher Learning Commission in its 2000 comprehensive review and visit. The following areas might be impacted by this request:

### **Enrollment decline and recruiting**

**(Core Component 5c)**

The largest growth in enrollment at the University of Wyoming has been in the distance programs delivered through the Outreach School. This enrollment is tapping a largely nontraditional student group, providing these learners access to more baccalaureate and graduate level learning opportunities. **(5c)**

### **Institutional standards for purchase and support of software and hardware**

All software programs utilized in distance education (including the online platform) are now reviewed and agreed to by the University of Wyoming Technology Planning Council.

### **Consistent implementation of assessment**

**(Core Components 2c, 3a)**

Distance programs utilize the same assessment instruments as those utilized on the main campus. Academic colleges and departments determine the assessment tools and those tools are administered to students in distance programs. In addition, the Outreach School conducts regular assessment focused on the quality of the distance learning environment. **(2c, 3a)**

## **IMPLEMENTATION, SUSTAINABILITY, AND EVALUATION OF PROPOSED CHANGE IN STATUS**

**(Core Components 2b, 2c, 3a, 3b)**

This change is not a change in University of Wyoming priorities or processes. Rather, the university will continue to utilize its academic colleges and departments, in partnership with the Outreach School, university administrators, and colleagues at the state's community colleges, to determine the need for distance programs. The Outreach School will continue to research, develop, and implement new distance learning delivery technologies that are pedagogically appropriate. The proposed change will merely allow the Outreach School to pursue innovative programs with greater flexibility and responsiveness.

The university, the Outreach School, and the academic colleges will continue to discuss and determine the most appropriate funding and compensation models for distance education. The sustainability of programs is a central consideration for administrators, and proposed models for revenue sharing with academic units incorporate plans for ensuring sufficient revenue flows to maintain programs with viable enrollments. (2b) Also, the university has implemented processes for recognizing outreach teaching, advising, and research in the tenure and promotion process. This helps to ensure that the university's core faculty are committed to teaching at a distance, an issue identified in the university's first academic plan as crucial to the viability and quality of distance-delivered programs. (3b)

The University of Wyoming evaluates its distance education programs in a number of ways, each of which targets a different aspect of distance program delivery and support. Learning assessment occurs through assessment plans developed by academic departments with the support of the University Assessment Coordinators Committee. (2c, 3a) Continuous evaluation of program quality is also facilitated through articulation with Wyoming community colleges and partnerships with academic colleges and departments. Changes in departmental composition might positively or negatively affect program delivery. Discussions with departments and colleges have led to the cessation of distance delivery of degree programs or halted the proposed development of a program. Community college colleagues are effective advocates for students during the transfer process and communicate such issues as poor advising and other practical issues in the delivery of a program.

The university has arranged its distance delivery of programs as a series of partnerships internal and external to the university. While this often makes the development of new programs for delivery a cumbersome process, it also has proven crucial to the ongoing and effective evaluation of program quality.

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## CONCLUSION

The University of Wyoming believes that the self-study, this official change request, and forthcoming supporting documentation provided to the evaluation team offer sufficient evidence of its capabilities to deliver effective distance education programs. Because the systems and processes to do so are mature, the university is officially requesting a stipulation change in affiliation status. Such a change will allow the university to become more flexible in meeting the needs of the citizens of the State of Wyoming. The granting of this change allowing the university to move forward with new distance education programs without prior commission approval will not impact the quality of these programs in any way. The university takes seriously the policies of the commission and the standards for accreditation, and will continue to adhere to them in the future.

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