December 12, 2012

To:  Steering Committee

From:  Susan Bakewell-Sachs, Interim Provost

Re:  Blended and compressed format courses.

With two blended learning pilots completed, an impending second pilot of a winter term, and beginning implementation of a new learning management system, TCNJ must determine the most appropriate manner in which to govern courses delivered through evolving technologies and in different formats.  Initial steps could be to define teaching and learning modes and format structures, and then to develop a governance process to assure quality.

**Defining Modes**

Generally speaking, there are three common modes of group instruction/learning along a continuum in higher education.  These include face-to-face instruction, blended instruction, and online or distance instruction.  While it may seem that the differences among these instructional modalities are clear, they are actually quite gray.  For example, in a traditional face-to-face class, an instructor might include a computer-based learning module, web-based simulation work, an on-line discussion board or a class wiki.  These are all tools that can also be used in a blended model.  How many class sessions or assignments must be on-line for a course to be considered blended?  Similarly, how much face-to-face time should exist in order to classify a course as blended, rather than online?

The Sloan Consortium classifies courses into four categories:  Traditional (0% online), Web Facilitated (1-29% online), Blended/Hybrid (30-79% online) and Online (80% or more online).  Since all TCNJ courses can be managed through course management software and are therefore at least 1% online, I recommend for consideration that TCNJ collapse the first two Sloan categories into a single “traditional” category.  I further recommend that a course in which less than 30 percent is delivered on-line be classified as a traditional, or face-to-face, course.  When more than 30 percent but less than 80 of the content is delivered on-line or through another non-face-to-face medium, the course should be classified as blended/hybrid.  A course in which more than 80 percent of the content is delivered online should be classified as a distance, or online, course.

**Defining Formats**

A credit hour typically consists of 15 (50 minute) hours.  This is the minimum standard included in NJ state code.   Therefore, a TCNJ course unit (4 credits) must consist of 60 hours of scheduled time over the course of a term.  This is typically achieved by 45 hours of traditional class time and 15 hours of assigned group work (the fourth hour).  (Clearly for blended courses, specific instructional hours are challenging to calculate; honest estimates or face-to-face equivalents must be employed).  TCNJ currently runs three distinct formats:  a traditional semester of approximately 15 weeks, a short format (typically used in the summer) of about five weeks, and a compressed format (typically used in May and currently used in the winter) of less than five weeks.  All of these formats are designed to meet state instructional hour standards.  That said, there are assumptions often made about time outside of a course necessary for learning.  A common assumption is that students should study about two hours outside of class for every hour in class.  Therefore each format should assure that this level of study time is available to students.

I propose that these formats be formalized using the following standards.  A traditional term is defined as a term lasting longer than 10 weeks.  A short term is defined as a term between five and 10 weeks in length.  A compressed term is defined as less than five weeks in duration.

**Building Appropriate Course Approvals**

I propose that the appropriate governance committee (most likely CAP) consider for adoption the definitions laid out earlier in this document and recommend an appropriate governance structure to oversee courses in different modalities and formats.  In particular, I recommend that when new courses are proposed, the proposer specify the mode(s) and format(s) for the course being proposed. Curriculum committees would, as part of their approval process, then consider the courses to be taught in different manners.  This way, the faculty can assure that the learning goals of the courses are indeed appropriate for the formats and modes in which they will be taught.