Contact: Rachel Boon

DISTANCE EDUCATION TASK FORCE FINAL REPORT

Action Requested: Accept the report and approve the recommendations of the Distance Education Task Force.

Introduction

In 2021, the Board of Regents initiated a process of developing its next strategic plan to frame how to move further towards its vision.

> "The Board of Regents will lead an accessible internationally renowned system that provides education, conducts research, and benefits Iowa, the nation and the world."

In addition to thinking about this vision in relation to a world still grappling with a global pandemic response, the Board wanted to consider the evolving nature of higher education in the United States and beyond, with particular attention to the role of distance education. For decades now various forms of distance education have played a key role in how universities provide high quality educational access locally and across the globe. The landscape of distance education providers is also vast and growing as institutions seek to diversify enrollments and meet labor market needs for employees with high-level skills and education.

All three Iowa Regent Universities have well-developed distance education infrastructure and extensive offerings of undergraduate and graduate courses. Each year new programs and courses are made available in online or hybrid formats, and growth in enrollments in courses with this mode of delivery has been continuous. During 2020 and 2021, this infrastructure, and the faculty and staff who create and deliver the courses, were tested with a massive transition of thousands of course sections. They performed admirably, ensuring continuity of quality educational experiences that served students and the state effectively. Looking forward, the Board is ready to work with the universities and determine how to build on this strong base.

Board of Regents Strategic Plan and Task Force Charge

The return to more traditional face-to-face courses in the current academic year was necessary and appropriate, but the history of success in distance education, the lessons learned in the pandemic, and emerging enrollment trends informed how the Board considered its future strategies. To enhance their understanding of the campus, regional, and national environment for distance education, the Board engaged Huron Consulting Group in summer and fall 2021 to examine the regional and national landscape and identify opportunities for the Board and the universities to expand and enhance distance education.

The focus areas of Huron's work included the strategic importance, target region, target audiences and labor market connections for an expansion of distance education. Stakeholders from the Board and across the universities provided key perspectives about context, capacity and opportunities that shaped a final report presented to the Board in September 2021 during a strategic planning retreat (see appendix A for list of stakeholders). The report emphasized the need to grow distance education strategically and considered the spectrum from solely institution-

based distance education, to a newly developed, unified "online campus" to centralize all distance education and digital course delivery. Ultimately, collaborating across the universities with new "system" approaches that capture synergies and efficiencies rose as most likely to enable the kind of strategic growth in online enrollment that the Board is seeking.

Huron Report Summary

- **Evolving perceptions of online learning impacted by COVID-19 and an impending decline in the number of traditional undergraduate students have placed higher education at an inflection point.** As a result, many institutions are seeking to bolster their online and distance education programs and courses and overall footprint.

- **The Board and Regent institutions agree on the motivations for expanding distance education but differ on the role the Board should play in the expansion.** Both see the expansion of distance education as an opportunity to increase enrollment and revenue through the development of graduate and professional programs for adult learners; however, the Board seeks to play a more active role and the Regent institutions desire to pursue their own approaches within the bounds of a high-level strategy established by the Regents.

- **Data supports expanding distance education programs and courses with a focus on local students and graduate and professional programs.** Graduate and professional enrollments increased 7% between 2015 and 2019 while undergraduate enrollments declined 3%; on-campus students' preferences have evolved as a result of the pandemic (73% say they will seek online courses in their return to campus); and, despite being online, students prefer local institutions for online programs (63% of online students live within 100 miles of their school).

- **The adoption of "systemness" could be beneficial in helping the Board to manage the challenges that may come up during implementation of distance education-related decisions.** Although the Regent institutions are not officially a system, themes that arose during stakeholder interviews align with the current focus of university systems.

- **The Board could consider an independent, hybrid, or integrated operating model approach to expanding distance education.** Independent models leave distance education functions at the institutional level, hybrid models establish a central unit providing support to the system institutions, and integrated models establish a separate campus dedicated to online. Each model comes with certain benefits and risks which need to be assessed and discussed before implementation.

The report also suggested that the path forward for the Board to establish a strong foundation for a new distance education model should begin with defining a shared distance education strategy in the first 90 days (outlined graphically in appendix C). As a result, the Board defined their strategic plan objectives for distance education and appointed a Distance Education Task Force (DETF) to begin this work (see appendix B).

The first priority of the Board's strategic plan centers on *Student Success and the Academic Experience.* Objective 1.4 notes the following:

> The Regent institutions will increase accessibility to high quality academic offerings utilizing online and distance education to facilitate student learning and access to certificates and degrees.

The plan further charges the institutions with two specific goals:

1. Set five-year goals to expand online programs in areas consistent with campus expertise and market demand, and that will enhance opportunities as well as target underserved populations and industries.

2. Design a pilot general education course sharing opportunity for students at one institution to take online courses from the other two universities, evaluate the results, and evaluate adding additional opportunities.

The members of the DETF received the following charge from the Board in November 2021:

> The Distance Education Task Force will,

> 1. Define the role of the system-level coordination;

2. Identify any new or needed changes to the policy framework;
3. Agree on leadership mechanisms for implementing the distance education strategy and desired changes to the existing model; and
4. Identify target audiences and stakeholders.

With coordination by the Board office, and supported by the Huron Consulting Group, the DETF was asked to develop a set of recommendations to bring to the Board in the first half of 2022. The rest of this report summarizes the process undertaken as well as some of the information that guided the Task Force in its work. Finally, three primary recommendations are presented with a series of specific tasks associated with each.

DE Task Force Process and Context

The DETF held six virtual meetings from November 2021 to March 2022. During these meetings each aspect of the charge was discussed and the DETF reviewed background data on enrollments and demographics of college students, as well as information on the distance education efforts of systems and institutions across the country. All the trends across the landscape have intensified due to the COVID-19 pandemic and add some urgency to the need for strategic focus on distance education. The early meetings of the DETF emphasized the challenges and opportunities in the landscape nationally, as well as an assessment of the market place for programs, students and workforce needs.

Strategic Importance: Landscape Impact on Distance Ed

The landscape trends below have intensified as a result of COVID-19, influencing higher education's adoption and growth of distance education while prompting the need for strategic plans that address the changes challenging the industry.

Changing student demographics, populations, and needs

The proportion of adult learners and lower-income students is increasing, while the population of "traditional" college-going students is expected to decline sharply. **The Iowa Board of Regents identified distance education as a method of attracting students from these audiences.**

Challenges to the core higher education business model

As universities compete to attract students with new facilities, degree programs, and services, the costs to serve students have risen. **Distance education may present an opportunity for the Regent institutions to grow revenue through increased enrollment and reduce costs via operational efficiencies.**

Decreasing "half-life" of skills and increased demand for them

For the first time in history, in-demand work skills are changing dramatically within workers' lifetimes, reducing the ROI on traditional educational training. **The Board of Regents seeks to create distance education programming aimed at enhancing skills for today's workforce in the state of Iowa and the surrounding communities.**

Rise of online learning and competency-based education

Traditional higher education faces new competition through internet-based offerings, for-profit certification options, and innovative adult/nontraditional offerings. **The Board of Regents aims to be competitive in the distance education space though the traditional method will remain a focus.**

Changes in funding models

Changes in government funding for education and research are creating challenges. Corporations are driving more basic research. **Reductions in state appropriations will require the Board of Regents to consider other methods of revenue generation, for example, by establishing educational partnerships with corporations.**

Allocation of limited and/or shrinking resources

Operational challenges are forcing institutional leaders to make difficult decisions about constrained resources. **Aligning the Regent institutions' leadership around distance education, internal resource allocation, financial transparency, and strategic decision-making is critical.**

The market for distance education regionally and nationally showed continuous growth prior to 2020, while overall enrollments across degree levels stagnated or fell (see figure below). With student success as a foundational priority, the DETF agreed that the opportunity in the market is strongest in the area of graduate and professional programs delivered online. These students often require the most flexibility as they balance school, work and family obligations, but they may also have strong affinities with Iowa universities and wish to maintain that connection as they grow their careers.

Market Analysis Overview

Strategic Importance

Why is online and distance education an increasingly important part of the portfolio today and in the future?

⚠ Distance education presents an opportunity to address changes in the higher ed landscape, including **accelerated growth and more favorable perceptions of online education due to the COVID-19 pandemic** and the **forecasted decline in the number of traditional students.**

Distance education enrollments are increasing, and more institutions are actively expanding their online footprint, implying **increased competition in the market.**

Target Region

Does current research support a state/regionally-focused distance ed strategy or broader?

Large, **national providers spend more than $100 million** in advertising and promotions implying a high cost to be competitive in this space at scale.

Nearly **two-thirds of distance education students live within 100 miles of their enrolled institution** (up from 54% in 2014), indicating a preference towards local institutions. Additionally, **neighboring state systems focus on meeting the needs of their state and nearby economic hubs,** including Iowa.

Target Audience

What are the target student audiences and program level types? How have students' preferences for online evolved?

Growth of online programs is expected to continue, with **grad and professional degrees/certificates presenting the most opportunity.** Undergrad enrollment among adult learners has declined and the **match between their needs and the offerings of four-year institutions may be limited.**

COVID has expanded the online market and the desire among on-campus students to leverage online courses for greater academic flexibility, as 73% of on-campus students plan to take online courses in the return to campus.

Labor Market Connection

How can distance education be expanded to provide better service to the state and workforce needs?

Developing market intelligence capabilities will be valuable for the Regents institutions to advance the **alignment of distance education programs with state workforce and economic initiatives and labor market trends.**

Labor market analysis reveals **healthcare and social assistance, professional, scientific and technical services, construction, and finance and insurance as potential areas of focus for future distance programs.**

National Enrollment Trends [1, 2]

Historic National Enrollment by Program Level
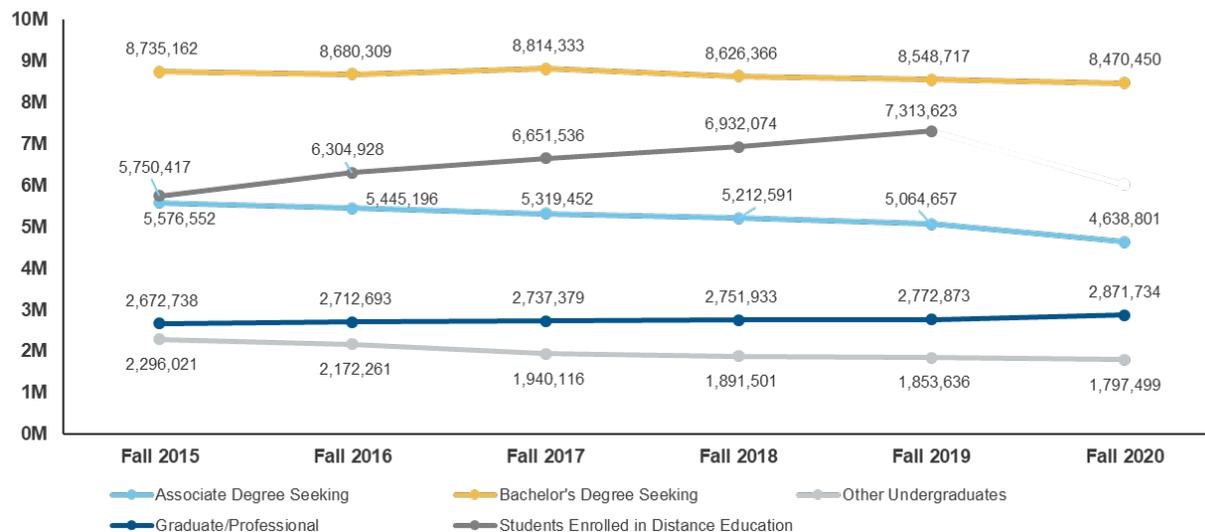
Source: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center
1. Note that distance education data from IPEDS was only available through Fall 2019 and includes undergraduate and graduate students.
2. EAB, Emsi.

Through the next meetings, the DETF looked at data to understand the current state of online program presence and coordination at Iowa Regent's universities. The annual distance education reports to the Board (on the Board of Regents website) highlight the number of programs and enrollments, indicating robust activity and growth over the past several years. The table below

shows a snapshot of the universities' pre-pandemic distance education footprint showing that SUI has the most on-campus students taking DE courses, ISU has the most graduate and certificate programs, and UNI has the highest proportion of the total enrollment in DE-only classes.

Online Program Presence, 2019-20

Online Program Presence & Course Registrations (19-20)	SUI	ISU	UNI
Undergraduate Programs	8	2	4
Graduate Programs	13	28	26
Certificate Programs[1,2]	18	32	3
Fall 2019 Distance Ed-Only Headcount	2,942	1,357	1,264
Fall 2019 Distance Ed Headcount Incl. On-Campus Students Taking DE	15,605	8,518	3,740
% of Total Enrollment Enrolled as Distance Ed-Only[4]	9.4%	4.1%	**12.1%**
% of Total Enrollment Enrolled in Some or Exclusively Distance Ed[4]	**50.0%**	25.5%	35.7%

Source: Annual Distance Education Report to the Board of Regents, 2020

The figure below indicates that the growth in enrollment for students only taking distance education courses is largely among Iowa residents, consistent with university objectives to reach Iowans in all 99 counties and meet Iowa's workforce and employment needs.

Iowa Regent Institutions: Distance Education Only - Student Residences
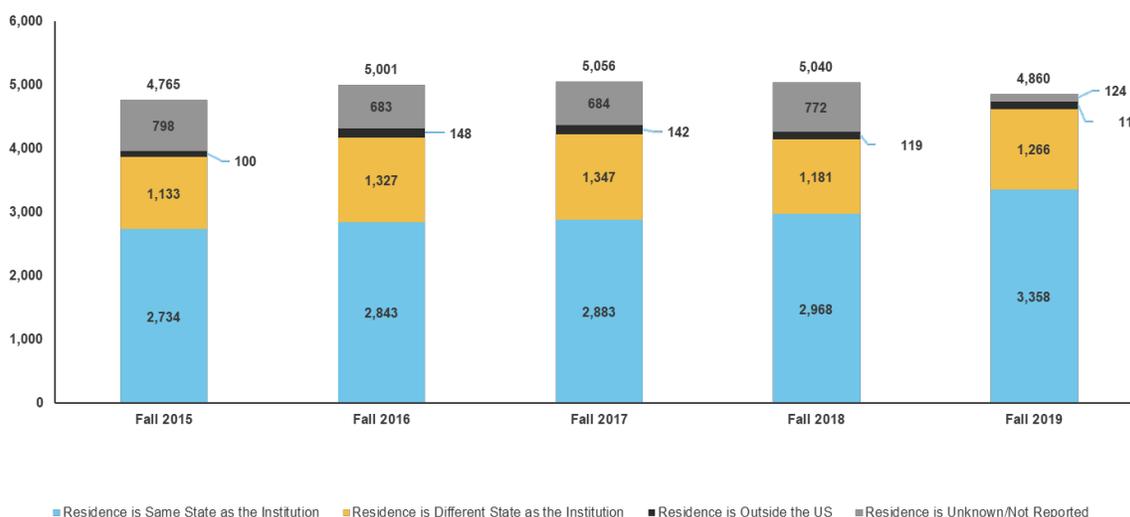
Source: IPEDS

An important observation as additional collaboration opportunities are considered is the variance across the three Regent universities in the organizational distribution of distance education and online program development. The University of Northern Iowa largely manages distance

education efforts through an integrated central office. The University of Iowa has a portion of these activities centralized. At Iowa State University, distance education management is primarily distributed among the colleges, but ISU is currently undergoing a campus-led reorganization of distance education that will integrate most functions into a central support unit. The table below shows how these functions are distributed in Iowa. Additional collaborative opportunities across institutions are likely enabled in functional areas (such as some of those listed below) where the universities are somewhat more internally centralized.

Online Program Lifecycle Stage	SUI	ISU	UNI
Program Ideation	Colleges; Varied/Limited	Colleges; Varied/Limited	University Supported
Recruitment, Admissions & Marketing	Colleges; Varied/Limited	Colleges; Varied/Limited	University Supported
Program Instructional Design	University Supported	Colleges; Varied/Limited	University Supported
Faculty Training & Development	University Supported	University Supported	University Supported
Program Delivery	University Supported[3]	Colleges; Varied/Limited	University Supported[3]
Student Support Services	Colleges; Varied/Limited	Colleges; Varied/Limited	University Supported
Governance & Oversight	Colleges; Varied/Limited	Colleges; Varied/Limited	University Supported

Systems of universities in other states (both similar and dissimilar to Iowa) have a wide range of coordination and leadership approaches. In gathering and reviewing benchmark information, the team focused primarily on systems that have hybrid approaches that include institution-focused efforts mixed with system-level coordination (see appendix D for a list of systems included in benchmarking). Early on, the Board clarified that a fully centralized approach to all distance education delivery was not aligned with its strategic goals, so these hybrid models provided helpful context for the range of approaches to consider. The table on page seven summarizes system-level approaches in five Midwestern states.

Additional systems were included in the review of approaches to course-sharing. Several systems have institutions that are part of the peer groups of Iowa State University, the University of Iowa or the University of Northern Iowa, but others provided unique models to certain activities such as cross-institutional course sharing. The pilot program developed by the Regent universities several years ago was ended in 2017, but the Board recognized that course sharing approaches in other places have found success. The DETF had extensive discussions on cross-institutional course sharing while reviewing information and data gathered during interviews with some of these systems.

The final meetings of the DETF focused on finalizing recommendations that would serve the institutions well and help meet the strategic goals of the Board. The group reviewed the more than 50-year history of cross-institutional collaboration through the Statewide Extension,

Continuing and Distance Education Council (SECDEC) and discussed aspects of collaboration that can inhibit or enable meeting the goals of the Board.

System-Level Roles in Core Activities

While each peer adopting a hybrid model has a System-level office that supports the distance education lifecycle, the services these units offers to member institutions varies substantially.

Central Unit Name	Mode A — NU Online	Mode A — Center for Education Innovation	Mode B — UM System Office of eLearning	Mode B — Office of Online Education	Mode B — University of Wisconsin Extended Campus
Program Development			◖	●	●
Recruitment & Admissions				●	●
Unified Marketing Services	●	●	●	●	●
Market Research and Feasibility Studies		◖	●		●
Instructional Design			●	●	●
Faculty Training & Development			●	●	●
Student Support Services			●		●
Governance & Oversight	●	●	●	●	●

● Service provided by System unit   ◖ Service partially offered by System unit

Task Force Recommendations and Next Steps

After reviewing the data, discussing perspectives on the current state and examining emerging trends, the DETF ultimately developed three primary recommendations for the Board of Regents. These recommendations can serve as the base for a future strategic direction on distance education.

Recommendation 1

> **Update the charge, structure, authority, and alignment of the Statewide Extension, Continuing and Distance Education Council (SECDEC) to meet current and future needs for cross-institutional leadership of distance education.**

A. Review the charge and activities of SECDEC on an annual basis to establish new goals or tasks for the coming year
B. Determine how this re-vitalized leadership group can play a role in supporting institutional and Board objectives for high-quality distance education

Recommendation 2

> **Identify shared resources/policies that would enable the expansion of new online offerings and further promote currently available online offerings for all institutions, with an initial focus on graduate and professional offerings and the regional market of students and workforce needs.**

A. Streamline institutional and Board policies for the approval of online programs to enhance the institutions' ability to respond to market demand
B. Identify board- or institutional-level financial incentives and/or strategies that support expansion of programs delivered online
C. Develop a state-wide marketing hub online to promote the inventory of online offerings across all institutions
D. Create opportunities for instructional designers (as well as professionals in other areas that support online education) to gather on a regular cadence to promote inter-institutional collaboration and alignment of best practices
E. Explore options for collaborative market research efforts and program feasibility studies
F. Explore options for joint contracts for technology or services that support online education

Recommendation 3

> **Design a pilot general education course sharing opportunity for students at one institution to take online courses from the other two universities, evaluate the results, and evaluate adding additional opportunities.**

A. Conduct analysis on current state of course waitlists, credits transferred in, and course utilization to inform the design and focus of a course sharing program
B. Examine the process of designing joint programs that leverage assets from multiple campuses and identify relevant barriers to resolve
C. Work together to define a viable financial framework or strategy that promotes sustainability of course sharing and/or joint programs

These recommendations are the culmination of the work of the Distance Education Task Force. The next steps after the Board of Regents considers endorsing these recommendations will fall to the institutions for implementation. The Council of Provosts is the appropriate body to manage the responsibility and accountability of moving this work forward, particularly in relation to the statewide distance education council. Aspects of distance education work will continue to be specific to each university and their respective colleges, schools and departments that develop programs, but additional ongoing and expanded collaborative opportunities are elevated through these recommendations.

Appendix A— **List of stakeholders engaged in Huron's initial assessment**

Board of Regents:
Regent Michael Richards, President
Regent Sherry Bates, President Pro Tem
Regent David Barker
Regent Nancy Boettger
Regent Abby Crow
Regent Milt Dakovich
Regent Nancy Dunkel
Regent Jim Lindenmayer
Regent Greta Rouse
Mark Braun, Executive Director
Rachel Boon, Chief Academic Officer
Steve Warnstadt, Coordinator, Western Iowa Regents Resource Center

Iowa State University:
Beate Schmittmann
Laura Jolly
Sam Easterling
Daniel Robison
Sriram Sundararajan
Carmen Bain
Ann Marie VanderZanden
Susan Wohlsdorf-Arendt
Andrea Wheeler
Jon Perkins

University of Iowa:
Amy Kristoff-Brown
Dan Clay
Sara Sanders
Amanda Thein
Anne Zalenski

University of Northern Iowa:
Colleen Mulholland
Brenda Bass
Leslie Wilson
John Fritch
Kent Johnson
Jennifer Waldron
Karen Cunningham

Appendix B--**Distance Education Task Force Member List**

Task Force:

David Barker (Board of Regents)
Clarissa Barrenchea (graduate student, University of Northern Iowa)
Nancy Boettger (Board of Regents)
Michael Hager (Senior Vice President for Finance and Operations, University of Northern Iowa)
Jon Perkins (President-Elect of Faculty Senate, Associate Professor of Accounting, Iowa State University)
Beate Schmittmann (Dean, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Iowa State University)
Amanda Thein (Dean, Graduate College, University of Iowa)
Jennifer Waldron (Dean, Graduate College and Office of Continuing Education, University of Northern Iowa)
Jonathan Wickert (Provost and Senior Vice President, Iowa State University)
Barbara Wilson (President, University of Iowa)
Leslie Wilson (Dean, College of Business, University of Northern Iowa)
Anne Zalenski (Associate Dean of University College and Director of Distance and Online Education, University of Iowa)
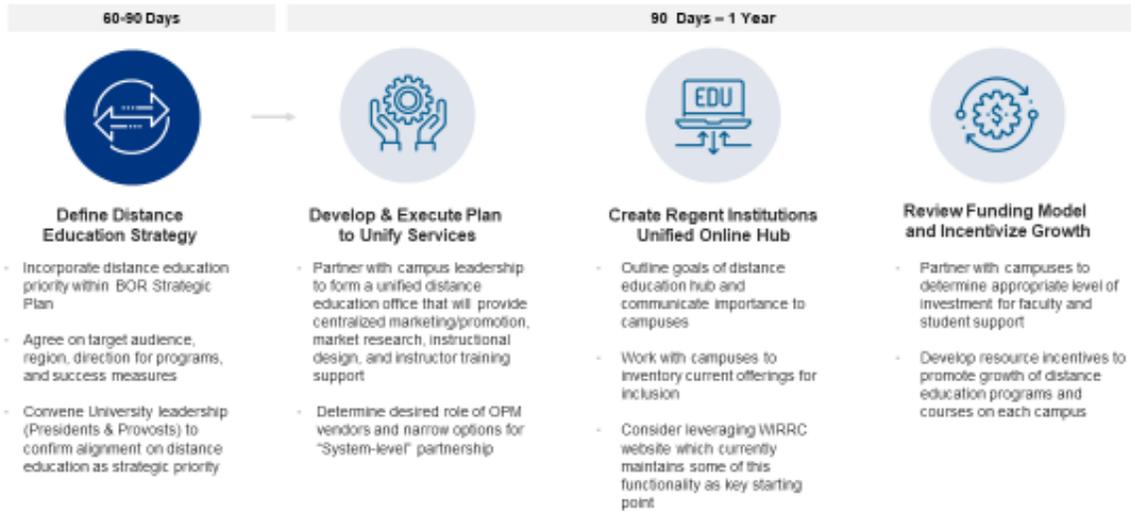
Staff Support:

Mark Braun (Executive Director, Board of Regents)
Rachel Boon (Chief Academic Officer, Board of Regents)
Laura Dickson (Executive Assistant, Board of Regents)

Appendix C

Path Forward

The following steps, critical for establishing a strong foundation, could be taken by the Board of Regents as it considers a move towards a new distance education model.

60-90 Days	90 Days – 1 Year		
Define Distance Education Strategy	**Develop & Execute Plan to Unify Services**	**Create Regent Institutions Unified Online Hub**	**Review Funding Model and Incentivize Growth**
· Incorporate distance education priority within BOR Strategic Plan	· Partner with campus leadership to form a unified distance education office that will provide centralized marketing/promotion, market research, instructional design, and instructor training support	· Outline goals of distance education hub and communicate importance to campuses	· Partner with campuses to determine appropriate level of investment for faculty and student support
· Agree on target audience, region, direction for programs, and success measures	· Determine desired role of OPM vendors and narrow options for "System-level" partnership	· Work with campuses to inventory current offerings for inclusion	· Develop resource incentives to promote growth of distance education programs and courses on each campus
· Convene University leadership (Presidents & Provosts) to confirm alignment on distance education as strategic priority		· Consider leveraging WIRRC website which currently maintains some of this functionality as key starting point	

Appendix D—**Benchmark institutions analyzed/engaged**

University of Wisconsin System
University of Illinois System
University of Nebraska System
University of Minnesota System
University of Missouri System
Indiana University System
Idaho Board of Regents
California Community Colleges
University of Tennessee System