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Exerpted from Michael O'Loughlin 's July 24 1997 memo to the Chair of the Forum

Below is an extended discussion reacting to the points or variables President Merwin referred to as reasons for delay on a policy [on distance education].

I had an opportunity to talk with Bill Zak and Kathy Fox two members of the Committee who were quite active in drafting the policy endorsed by the Forum. Bill Zak also was deeply involved in the previous year's work on the Task Force Committee as was I.

After reviewing the President's memorandum we believe that the Forum or the senate ought to stick to the present policy position. With all due respect we don't believe that any of the variables cited undermine the logic or the practicality of the policy. Let me respond to each of the factors to make this case.

1. The President suggests that policy delay is called for because a new dean of graduate continuing and external education is going to be hired and we need to "consider his or her input in our reflections on distance education." No one has suggested that the policy is necessarily written in stone. As with all policies this policy will and should be under review as it is implemented. If and when this new dean is hired he or she may indeed have ideas about shifting the policy or may find it constructive and believe that it is working well.

In either case we don't see why the policy should be delayed until someone is hired in the indefinite future particularly since other factors have pressed us to get a policy in place. As many have told us before the technology of distance learning is moving ahead and we need to move sooner rather than later to have a policy which allows us to steer it in the direction that we believe is appropriate. Delay means that the university has no official policy and that various narrower more parochial interests will guide an ad hoc decision making process.

2. With regard to the still forming strategic plan again we don't believe that the present policy position excludes programmatic and entrepreneurial ventures as long as they fit within the guidelines of the policy. To the extent that the strategic plan begins to consider ventures that do not fit within the policy then policy review may be called for. But isn't this true for all policies? Through a long and arduous process which

included many committee meetings open hearings and a number of Forum sessions the University community reached unanimous agreement on the present policy. All segments of the community had ample opportunity to participate in the process. We should go forward with the policy in place now and deal with specific challenges and opportunities if and when these arise.

3. The President raises the issue of policy towards the use of the Web in distance education. It is true that the present policy position focuses primarily on the role and place of distance education in the specific form of interactive video and does not address the role of the Web specifically. However it does allow for openness regarding other forms of distance education which would clearly include the Web.

To the extent that additional issues must be addressed regarding the Web couldn't these be addressed specifically and introduced as amendments to the present policy if and when they arise? Again if they raise profound questions regarding the existing policy then we may have to revisit the policy. But this is no reason to delay implementation of the present policy.

4. The president suggests that "any policy developed in the rapidly changing area of technology must incorporate the highest degree of flexibility and autonomy for departments and schools who have embraced technology-based instruction as an integral part of their individual mission." Therefore he concludes that perhaps school curriculum committees - rather than the University Curriculum Committee - would be better decision making mechanisms for course decisions.

On these two points we have to disagree. Given the enormous resources needed for distance education we do not believe that departments and schools should have autonomy with regard to the use of distance education. To the extent that individuals and departments have done this already means that resources have gone in that direction rather than for something else without the University community as a whole having a say in the matter.

We also believe that any significant development of interactive video courses in any department and school will inevitably change the character of the campus. Its impact is not just on the school that has expanded this option but instead on the rest of the campus community as well. Therefore before any school begins this expansion a university wide committee representing the entire campus should have the final authority in the decision making process.

This is precisely why it is crucial that the decisions over distance education courses be made in a university wide body in this case the University Curriculum Committee. It is only there that all of the university's departmental and school interests and the interests of the whole can be addressed. To hand over the authority to the schools guts the idea that we can work as a whole community on this issue and practically speaking eliminates a university wide faculty role in oversight. It amounts to a Balkanization of the institution on this issue and would lead to continuing struggles over resources.

5. The President also suggests that whatever decision making structure emerges should recognize that the "Provost should be the final approving authority." I am not sure exactly what this means. Does it mean that the Provost must sign off on anything that develops but is committed to supporting the committee's majority opinion unless some pressing legal issue is involved?

Or does this mean that even if for example the University Curriculum Committee reached a consensus on a position that the Provost could nevertheless overturn this position in essence always able to exercise an executive line item veto? We don't believe that the latter authority is acceptable. The principle of shared governance would be violated on the central policy issue that faculty have traditionally claimed as core: curriculum issues.

Finally we would emphasize that the present policy is flexible enough to accommodate much experimentation within the overall parameters of a policy. We believe as well that the policy is prudent and cautious however in its approach to the new technological possibilities. This we believe is called for if we value the student centered intimate character of Salisbury State University. This policy allows us to move together in this area consciously deliberately and with due consideration to the interests of the whole community by the whole community.

In this light we hope that President Merwin remains open to the policy position as endorsed by the Forum. Even though he has raised some worries we would hope that if these objections were addressed he could reconsider his position and endorse the Forum's present policy and allow it to be implemented and see how it works. This policy has emerged over a long period of time with considerable thought and deliberation by many faculty and administrators. We should give it a chance to work.

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