March 13, 2012

MEMORANDUM

TO:     Dr. Byron Brown, Ad Hoc Taskforce on Assessment in Online Courses

FROM:   Dr. Karl Olson, Chair
        UCFA Personnel Policy Subcommittee

SUBJECT: Report of the Ad Hoc Taskforce on Assessment In Online Courses

In general, the subcommittee agreed that a strong assessment of students is necessary for online and hybrid courses. The report of the Taskforce helps take us closer to achieving that goal, and we are grateful to our colleagues on the Taskforce for their work on this initiative.

We have the following comments and recommendations:

(1) As the Taskforce notes, the advantage of online instruction is that it accommodates learners who otherwise might be unable to take advantage of traditional face-to-face educational opportunities because of considerations of time, distance, and other logistical factors. To some degree, the recommendations of the Taskforce offset these advantages, calling for students to be physically present at central locations at designated times. While these recommendations may be necessary, it is worth noting that they are less than ideal. MSU should continue to explore other options that preserve the flexibility of online instruction. For instance, could web cam technologies be used to ensure the right person was taking the test?
(2) The Taskforce should consider emphasizing in the Report the reality that no amount of proctoring will eliminate cheating. Proctoring is not a substitute for encouraging students to uphold high standards of academic honesty.

(3) Before endorsing the Taskforce’s recommendation to establish a network of testing centers across Michigan and throughout the CIC, the subcommittee would prefer to see more details regarding the feasibility of these options. How large a network is needed? What are the expected costs? How far would online learners need to travel to take tests? Are there other options (see comment about web cam technologies in item #1)?

(4) Members of the subcommittee expressed support for the general approach suggested by the Taskforce, which is to provide helpful options for faculty. If a central office for assessment of online courses is established, the mission should be to provide support and recommendations rather than to establish rigid rules. Similarly, the Report recommends that MSU “establish guidelines for assessment.” The word “guidelines” can mean “suggestions” or “rules.” The Taskforce should clarify what is meant in this context.