UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

Exploring Advanced Digital Learning:
A Report with Recommendations

Online Visioning Committee
Final Report
January 2013

Executive Summary

The past year has seen an explosion of interest in the use of digital technologies to make courses from elite US universities, taught by world-class researchers, available to the world. These efforts have resulted in novel applications of established technology, allowing the teaching and learning life cycle to be reinvented at a scale not possible by traditional means. These changes can be perceived as both disruptive and threatening.

In spring 2012, President Samarasekera struck an *Online Visioning Committee* to examine the state of digital learning technologies and the possibilities they open for advancing teaching and learning at the University of Alberta. The committee submitted a draft report to the President in August 2012; it has since been reviewed and revised, and is now being distributed for discussion by all interested members of the U of A community.

The University of Alberta has the opportunity to be a participant in the adoption and research of digital learning technologies, and to better position itself for the changes that are coming. These changes, if managed well, have the potential to benefit learners and support of the university's mission to create and sustain a vibrant and supportive learning environment.

This aspect of our mission is affirmed in both *Dare to Discover* and *Dare to Deliver 2011-2015.* To sustain a vibrant and enriched learning environment, the University of Alberta is committed to continuous improvement and enhancement in all aspects of student learning. In the area of digital learning in particular, many faculties have had individual successes in delivering flexible online programs, courses, and certificates that meet some learners' needs. Now is the time to unite as an institution to broaden the definition of a "learner" and to offer a rigorous, dynamic, and relevant University of Alberta learning experience to our students, and by extension, to all Albertans, Canadians, and the world.

Through the creation of novel digital learning experiences inside and outside of the classroom, we can appeal to traditional and non-traditional learners. This document contains the outline of a proposal for strengthening University of Alberta's current online presence in the e-learning space and creating opportunities for engaging both current and new learners.

It takes many decades to build an institution's reputation for excellence in teaching and research. The

digital learning space is wide open right now, with major institutions staking their claims and garnering international recognition for their efforts. Early players stand to enhance their reputation while also building innovative and enriched learning options for the benefit of their students. Late-adopters may be left behind. To date, no leader has emerged in Canada.

Summary of Recommendations

The Online Visioning Committee proposes the following nine recommendations:

1. Aspire to offer the highest quality digital learning environment within our comprehensive learning offerings to enhance in-class experience and create a strong online learning presence.
2. Create a central collaborative research and teaching service unit responsible for defining, operating, facilitating, and promoting the University of Alberta's advanced digital learning environment.
3. Partner with other universities and/or digital learning organizations to offer common courses, innovative certificates, and unique learning opportunities.
4. Consolidate existing teaching and learning resources.
5. Commit to a long-term funding strategy.
6. Broaden the integration of appropriate technologies in the classroom to support enhanced teaching and learning.
7. Offer certain online courses for free.
8. Create live learning events.
9. Encourage entrepreneurialism both in the learning environment and in research that has commercial viability.

Introduction

Online teaching and learning has received considerable media attention in the past year, spurred on by several high-profile events. In September 2011, Stanford University researchers offered an online computing science course (*Artificial Intelligence*) to over 160 000 students from around the world (20 000 students from 190 countries successfully completed the course and received a statement of accomplishment).[1] In January 2012, MIT announced the creation of their MITx program, allowing students to earn credit for taking free online courses from MIT's 10-year-old open courseware project.[2] Subsequent developments saw top-tier U.S. universities invest millions of dollars and create strategic partnerships as they tried to stake a claim in this potentially large marketplace. New companies have sprouted up, including Coursera,[3] Udacity,[4] and edX,[5] to offer high-quality online university courses to the world. In July 2012, the University of Toronto partnered with Coursera to offer not-for-credit courses.[6]

Many institutions are looking to replicate the two most visible projects -- open courseware (OCS) and massive open online courses (MOOCs, such as those offered by Stanford University). Where does the University of Alberta stand with respect to these developments? Should we wait to see what happens or should we be developing our own strategy? And, if the latter, what is an appropriate strategy?

The University of Alberta is well positioned to research and develop blended and online learning. In addition to researchers in pedagogy and strength in computer technology research, we have a long history of working with such approaches.[7] Combined with strategic partnerships with other leading universities and innovative companies, the University of Alberta has the potential to make major contributions to the evolving state of teaching and learning at the post-secondary level.

Although the focus of current media attention is online learning, opportunities for innovation go beyond teaching, and include cutting-edge research in education (pedagogy, new instructional delivery techniques, learning outcomes assessment, etc.), computing science (adaptive learning experiences, automated assessment, collaboration tools, security, etc.), humanities (analysis of privacy, collaboration, ethics, etc.) and business (case study analysis, market trends, analytics, etc.).

Building the University of Alberta's online presence has numerous potential benefits, some of which include:

- Improving and augmenting the learning experience of the classroom setting,
- Extending the university's reach to all Albertans regardless of location,

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[1] http://www.eurodl.org/?article=516

[2] http://web.mit.edu/newsoffice/2011/mitx-education-initiative-1219.html

[3] www.coursera.com

[4] www.udacity.com

[5] https://www.edx.org/

[6] https://www.coursera.org/utoronto

[7] Blended learning combines face-to-face classroom methods with online content and activities.

- Growing an online community through the use of Google and Moodle,
- Promoting the University of Alberta as leader in post-secondary education,
- Creating opportunities for high school students, and
- Engaging politicians, thought leaders, and industry.

Current State (as of August 2012) of Major Online Learning Initiatives

New companies and initiatives, primarily in the United States, have generated most of the excitement. The following is a capsule summary of the key numbers as of August 2012:

Coursera:
- $16 million from New Enterprise Associates and Kleiner Perkins,
- 1 000 000 students enrolled for 116 courses (less than 50 of which have started), and
- 1000 videos being translated into 20 languages by volunteers.

Udacity:
- $5 million from Charles River Ventures,
- 739 000 enrolled for 11 courses, and
- 20 companies that now accept certification of a student passing a course, and will accept the student's resume (affiliates model).

edX:
- $60 million in pledges from Harvard and MIT (with Berkeley recently joining),
- 150,000 students enrolled in their prototype course (spring 2012), and
- 0 enrollment stats yet, as their first offering begins September 2012.

Minerva Project:
- $25 million from Benchmark Capital, to launch in 2014,
- $20 000 per year is the upper bound on tuition,
- 85% of the academically qualify applicants for Harvard or Yale that do not meet the 7% acceptance rate are the target audience, and
- 100s of mini-campus around the world to be created by encouraging students to meet up and live together in various cities to work on degrees while sharing accommodations.

Analysis

As an initial part of strategic planning, the Online Visioning Committee debated the perceived strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of and for the University of Alberta in the blended and online learning worlds. The following are the results of this SWOT analysis.

Strengths:
- Recognition as the flagship university in Alberta and as one of the top institutions in Canada, with a strong international reputation.
- History of pedagogical expertise in e-learning.
- Alberta Innovates Centre for Machine Learning (AICML) is one of the top 3 machine learning institutes in the world.
- Successful department and program level blended and online pilots and proofs-of-concepts.
- Technologically enhanced labs, studio spaces, meeting spaces – the physical campus as a traditional focal point for any partial or full digital e-learning experiences.
- Diversity of specific graduate and PhD programs that are attractive to non- traditional learners seeking to increase their academic credentials while working.
- Several high-profile, world-renowned research groups.
- Highly engaged students and student-teachers at all levels interested in augmenting their current learning and teaching experiences with blended and online methods.
- Strong inter-professional and inter-disciplinary culture and infrastructure (CCIS, ECHA).

Weaknesses:
- Lack of coordination in pedagogy and e-learning across the university.
- Insufficient funding and resources dedicated to e-learning initiatives.
- Lack of fluency in course technology tools among majority of professoriate.
- Lack of institutional vision for e-learning.

Opportunities:
- Use research and pedagogical expertise to produce new learning models rather than simply adopting models produced by other universities/companies.
- Lead Canada in commitment to a free, online learning environment for the entire province.
- Generate revenue from new certificates and/or course completions.
- Generate revenue from licensing University of Alberta courses to other universities in Alberta and elsewhere.
- Further expand the definition of a "learner" to include students who live and study beyond campus boundaries.
- Grow student body and alumni community.
- Engage alumni as life-long learners, building relationships with graduates beyond development activities.
- Create partnerships with other universities for course sharing towards a certificate and/or degree.

- License research-produced algorithms and technologies to other universities/companies for their pedagogical, user interface, and assessment needs.
- Leverage our leadership in library/museums digital assets to create virtual, immersive educational experiences.
- Enhance reputation by being the leading Canadian institution in the e-learning/online space.
- Improve international brand recognition.

Threats:
- Mega-brand certificates (e.g., Harvard/MIT/Berkeley edX) become accepted by employers, with students and employers valuing them more than a University of Alberta degree.
- Loss of Canadian digital learning leadership to another major Canadian university.
- Forced to become consumers of other universities/companies courses, auto-grading, and assessment measurements instead of producing these ourselves.
- Increased price of entry as time passes.
- Negative reputational impact, from being perceived as out of touch.

Recommendations

Based on the above SWOT analysis, and in review of the feedback received across the university from group sessions with faculty, staff and students and via online feedback, below are the recommendations of the Online Visioning Committee.

Recommendation 1: Aspire to offer the highest quality digital learning environment within our comprehensive learning offerings to enhance in-class experience and create a strong online learning presence.

Analysis: As the province's flagship research university, the University of Alberta is well-positioned to lead Canada in defining a cutting-edge learning environment that augments the traditional model with blended, online and other emerging pedagogical methods. Already existing research and teaching excellence at the University of Alberta can be marshaled to achieve this goal, if given the mandate, incentive, and resources. The University of Alberta can become the Canadian leader in defining the digital learning environment for the post-secondary sector. The online playing field, especially in Canada, is wide open with few major universities making moves in this area (at least publicly). *Whereas most institutional gains in reputation are incremental and generally invisible, here is an opportunity to quickly make major reputational gains in a publicly visible way.*

Discussion: The University of Alberta should invest in creating and growing research expertise in areas related to online education. This includes areas such as pedagogy, customized learning environments, social media, technology enhancements, and teaching assessment.

To become Canada's leader in advanced digital learning environments, the University of Alberta must make this a priority research area. Research that is currently underway in emerging online learning

models needs to be supported by a well-defined program or body, so that findings for application of the research can be operationalized.

To become a leader in this area, the university must also invest in using the capabilities of the online environment and in creating new ways of engaging the online community. This could include, for example, the use of gaming, immersive environments, social media, automated testing, and adaptive systems. Investment could create several opportunities, including:

- Building virtual environments for learning;
- Creating opportunities for current University of Alberta students, alumni, and staff and faculty to mentor and participate with online teams;
- Leveraging Alberta investments in research areas such as the Alberta Ingenuity Centre for Machine Learning (AICML) and the GAMES research group (Computing Science); and
- Strategically assisting all faculties in identifying and creating additional continuing professional development certifications and degrees that can benefit from online approaches.

<u>Recommendation 2:</u> Create a central collaborative research and teaching unit responsible for integrating, facilitating, researching, and promoting the University of Alberta's advanced digital learning environment.

Analysis: The University of Alberta should have a central interdisciplinary collaborative unit, with a mandate that encompasses teaching (both online and in-class student experiences), research into teaching (both online and in-class), and the use of technology to engage students, professionals, and the community. It will enable and guide research and applied teaching/learning technology for all faculties, with a particular focus on creating flexible learning environments that can be utilized easily by faculty, staff, students, and the community. It will coordinate measurement of the learning environments to understand how the learning experience is enhanced as well as coordinate the communications of recommendations and best-practices across campus so that the learning models continue to evolve.

Discussion: Currently numerous units on campus are creating or supporting various types of offerings in the digital learning space. A central unit would seek ways to create communities of best practice, shared pedagogies, protocols and inter-compatibility of technologies, and software as well as strategies to ensure the quality of programs associated with University of Alberta educational productions. Innovative registration procedures, recognition of satisfactory course completion, and assurance of participant identity when completing assignments and tests will all need to be developed as the definition of "learner" continues to evolve.

Some of the services that a central collaborative unit could provide include the following:

- Pool of experts for deployment to units as needed,
- Central expertise/experience repository,
- Common branding and marketing,

- Common look and feel to online offerings,
- Establishment of development standards.
- Establishment of pedagogy standards,
- Creation of a community of practice to facilitate sharing of approaches and success stories in research and teaching relating to online and in-class experiences,
- Facilitation of research and the assessment of research outcomes, and
- Quality control.

A central unit may have several sub-groups, which might include the following:
- Pedagogy (for online and in-class),
- Technology (required for online delivery),
- Research (facilitating research into online and classroom instruction).
- Marketing and communications, and
- Administration.

The unit would benefit from having a dynamic and visionary Academic Director. This person must have academic credibility and management experience. He or she would coordinate a multidisciplinary team.

It would include educators, computer scientists, legal/privacy experts, librarians, business expertise, etc. dedicated to advancing the digital learning environment at the University of Alberta and beyond. Where appropriate, this unit would ensure that University of Alberta's online offerings differentiate us from potential provincial competitors. In particular, being a research institution, our offerings should include a research component. For example, we could differentiate ourselves by emphasizing the following strengths:

- Creating and recognizing new types of learning outcomes and approaches, for example, a team-based certificate. Here, a small group of friends, colleagues, or family members of different ages and educational experiences can participate in a program together. This approach not only reflects the organic, self-organized learning already manifesting itself online, but also introduces a new way of recognizing the importance that family, friends, and the social environment have in influencing choices made around both traditional and online learning.
- Creating an online learning community that will facilitate education through formal (e.g., courses, certificates), informal (e.g., public interest stories), and participatory (e.g., educational games) means.
- Utilizing University of Alberta pedagogical and computing expertise to craft and measure each online initiative, with the goal of deepening the understanding of how to create the most impactful online learning experiences.

Recommendation 3: Partner with other universities and/or digital learning companies to offer common courses, innovative certificates, and unique learning opportunities

Analysis: There are economies of scale that can be realized by working with other universities, educational partners, and consortia. The University of Alberta should consider partnering with an established consortium in the e-learning space (such as Coursera, Udacity, or edX), as well as creating a new consortium (possibly of Alberta institutions or others across Canada).

Discussion: A long-term vision might include having selected on-line University of Alberta courses (or aspects of courses) that have been shown to have excellent academic outcomes readily available to both registered and non-registered students. In addition to giving students additional flexibility and augmenting traditional face-to-face learning in the lecture hall, online University of Alberta courses could become a vehicle for reaching out to new provincial, national, and international audiences. To do this would be an enormous task, and difficult to accomplish alone. Partnerships with other universities or digital learning companies could bring critical mass to bear on the matter, especially in areas such as the development of common first-year course offerings. Partnerships would facilitate making resources available to help create online courses that are unique to the University of Alberta (for example, those in areas of research strength).

It is essential to determine if the University of Alberta will primarily be a consumer of emerging digital learning platforms, assessments, pedagogy, and algorithms or the producer of leading-edge digital pedagogy and technology innovations. It does not make sense to re-invent what is already being made available by other institutions.

Hence, this recommendation includes a 2012-2014 Partnership Pilot phase (see below). In this phase, a few focused courses will be offered via one or more external partners.

Recommendation 4: Consolidate existing teaching and learning resources.

Analysis: Centres and units that are actively exploring innovations in teaching technology/training should collaborate to achieve maximum impact and economies of scale.

Discussion: There are a number of innovative learning and teaching technology/training groups at the University of Alberta. A strong working relationship between these groups should be established through the central collaborative unit. As a starting point, a campus inventory should be prepared of emerging learning models (blended and online) already occurring at the university, the staff involved in these projects, and the pedagogy and technical expertise available to support these models.

Recommendation 5: Commit to both short-term and long-term funding strategies.

Prepare a staged funding strategy for a pilot operation of the central collaborative unit. This would include a significant initial investment that ensures the unit has sufficient funding to move quickly and

achieve results. However, it is also essential to develop a long-term funding strategy for digital learning at the University of Alberta.

Discussion: If the University of Alberta agrees that it is important to become a/the leading- player in the Canadian online learning space, then it must make the appropriate investments. Whether via internal efforts or in partnership with other institutions/companies, reshaping courses to take advantage of blended or online approaches is resource intensive and is not initially a cost-savings exercise. Eventually, the unit has the potential to become a revenue generator once in operation. Underfunding this initiative initially, especially given the competition and the urgency of this investment, would be a critical mistake.

The pilot partnerships program will require $2M in the first pilot year provided against stage-gated outcomes. Going forward, the Visioning Committee's detailed analysis suggests that funding per year will need to increase substantially over time for operating costs alone. To build and then sustain a leading unit over the long-term will require finding and securing funding from a variety of external sources.

Recommendation 6: Broaden the integration of appropriate technologies in the classroom to support enhanced teaching and learning.

Analysis: Specific initiatives in and across faculties to augment traditional lectures with online modules or interactive learning spaces can be implemented and will provide a platform for ongoing research into online pedagogy and computational analysis of the student-teacher experience.

Discussion: Online resources can be used to supplement the in-class experience, creating an enhanced teaching and learning environment. There is strong pedagogical support for blended course delivery, where students read the lecture material online and the classroom setting becomes an engagement experience (i.e., discussions, debates, case studies, problem solving, etc.). The University of Alberta should be proactive at both encouraging diverse ways of teaching and rewarding faculty members' initiative in creating diverse experiences.

Recommendation 7: Offer certain online courses for free.

Analysis: Where appropriate, offer online courses for free. Learners can have all the course material available online, allowing them to advance at their own pace. However, if the course is available for credit and the student would like to receive course credit at the University of Alberta, then this assessment will incur a fee.

Discussion: For the general public, create modular course offerings on topics and themes of interest. Some examples of the specific areas of expertise that would work well in a completely online offering are nanotechnology and its application across industries, games development, paleontology, Arctic strategy, and global food safety among others.

Some suggestions relating to free offerings include the following:
- While enrolment in courses should be free, a small fee could be charged if the user wants to be assessed and receive a statement of achievement/completion.
- Users who take the course for free would be encouraged to donate upon course completion.
- Modular courses can be combined in different ways towards a certificate or degree. Fees similar to that of currently offered certificates and degrees would be charged.
- If the university plans strategically about which courses to offer for free online, outstanding learners can be identified as top talent to recruit into the traditional university experience.
- Certain courses could be offered for free to students in countries where access to post-secondary education cannot currently meet growing demands. In addition to democratizing education, such efforts would help to advance the University of Alberta's vision of global citizenship.

Recommendation 8: Create live learning events.

Analysis: Leverage our online educational presence to offer public media events (in person and online) as a way of bringing more people into the University of Alberta family.

Discussion: To both improve university relations with and provide relevance to all Albertans and beyond, suggestions include web broadcasts of live events (e.g., distinguished speakers), creating online public lecture series, educational games, competitions, etc. For existing live learning, such as the Augustana-Calgary-Edmonton Rehabilitation Medicine professional masters degrees, create an online portal so people can observe live learning as it happens. This window into the University of Alberta online learning experience can encourage prospective new learners to take part in our offerings. The university should support the creation of live broadcasting for certain courses as well as ensure that certain learning spaces are equipped for online broadcasting and two-way participation from learners. Such efforts could focus on timely and current world events, ensuring University of Alberta provides relevant and thoughtful commentary to a world audience.

Recommendation 9: Encourage entrepreneurialism.

Analysis: The University of Alberta should partner with and create opportunities for working with (local) companies. Entrepreneurial activities in this area should be encouraged (especially for students).

Discussion: A central focus of the central collaborative unit will be the application of research findings and how these can translate into new learning offerings that may have commercial viability. For example, the creation of leading algorithms for learner assessment and grading could be licensed to other universities. The unit could also have a cohort of student researchers, and offer evaluation and operational support of student-led ideas for improved online learning experiences that could have potential commercial viability.

Benefits

The committee has defined the following benefits for each of our key audiences:

Albertans
- Receive a digital learning environment for free including secure version of Google Apps for Education, Moodle, additional online learning tools (to be determined), and free access to take any of the University of Alberta MOOC courses (for an official letter of completion from the University).
- For a fee, ability to take the competency-based tests to be awarded recognition for the thematic coursework completed.
- Ability to video and/or web conference in and attend certain courses as they happen.

Current professors, adjunct instructors, research and teaching assistants
- Access to a rich set of services for online learning. These services would be delivered by professionals who can provide strategic consultation on the best way to deliver course material (classroom, online, or combined), instructional designers to help develop sound pedagogical content, course developers to help move course materials into online format, and trainers.
- Ability to participate in online learning research projects as a way of introducing new opportunities to advance a specific teaching agenda or outcome.
- Incentives offered for the time and creative input dedicated to creating content for the course offerings given purely online.
- Integration of machine learning technology into the online environment, allowing instructors to better understand where students are excelling, grasping, or struggling with course content. This technology can be used to learn about individual students, thereby allowing for the creation of an adaptive learning environment.

University community
- Reputational enhancement from leading in research and deployment of a blended digital learning environment.
- Consolidation of disparate efforts in the online space into a coordinated and effective presence.
- Consolidation of online support technology into an efficient and effective university-wide service unit.
- Potential new revenue streams from non-traditional students, revenue-generating services, and intellectual property.
- Engage alumni in life-long learning opportunities.

Current Students
- Enhanced student learning experience within courses.
- Increased access to face-to-face and engaged learning opportunities in the classroom

environment.
- Augmented course materials available online, allowing for anytime access.
- Ability to attend "class" at any time, creating flexible school/work schedules.
- Potential to take key prerequisites online (e.g. high school equivalencies).
- Potential to take thematically grouped online courses for an embedded certificate.
- Graduate student TAs can learn the latest online teaching methods and tools.
- Potential for student to create customized learning experiences.

Government of Alberta
- Enhancement of the province's investment in the Supernet.
- Creation of expanded opportunities for all Albertans to get a University of Alberta degree or certificate, regardless of geographical location.
- Enrichment of the training of teachers, which will facilitate bringing online approaches and enhancements into the K-12 classroom.
- Better preparation for digital work environments across industries.

Suggested Timelines (as of August 2012)

The strategy recommended here will require careful thought and planning in its execution. Many of the recommendations could happen in parallel. Some of the recommendations could result in those pieces having a public launch by September 2013. Below is a suggested general timeline overview that does not include all specific activities:

September 2012 through March 2013
- Establish short-term funding strategy ($2M for year one, $5M for year two), while planning for a long-term strategy.
- Identify external partner(s) for a two-year pilot. Identify and create pilot courses for delivery though external partners(s).
- Engage AICML to help design instrumentation of the courses, to generate data that can be used to better understand the online learning experience.
- Begin operational design creation of central collaborative unit.
- Create live learning events.
- Identify researchers and projects supporting pedagogical and technical advances in emerging learning models.
- Determine target learner audiences for pilot initiatives.
- Audit emerging model initiatives on campus now.
- Begin determining scope of augmenting traditional courses (with student input).
- Define the leadership position for the central unit and search for a suitable candidate.
- Identify leader and key lead roles of central collaborative unit.
- Determine matrix of free, cost-per-assessment, for-course-credit courses and pricing model.
- Determine which new online learning experiences/tools are worth pilot investment.
- Finalize pilot course(s) with external partner(s).

April 2013 through September 2013
- Coordinate pedagogical and technological research measurement with pilot(s).
- Continue to determine scope of traditional courses augmented with student input.
- Create and deploy media/marketing campaigns for University of Alberta digital learning strategies and products.

September 2013 through March 2014
- Launch collaborative unit with pilot courses and online community platform.
- Launch augmentation of traditional courses.
- Deploy blended delivery in identified courses.
- Determine next set of online and blended pilot courses for September 2014 delivery

April 2014 and beyond
- Research findings on pilot offerings and community platform analytics inform and optimize offerings continuously.

- Research and analytics reviewed to determine new blended or online offerings across faculties.
- Determination of funding and funding sources to move from pilots to full campus operational model

Conclusion

In our recommendations, we described the creation of a central collaborative digital learning unit that will help determine the role of on-line technologies in the next generation of the university learning experiences. Universities of our size do not typically move quickly. Yet demand for improved learner outcomes and economic forces are changing the face of the postsecondary experience rapidly. We believe the professoriate at the University of Alberta have the research and teaching excellence not merely to comment on the changes happening but also define the new reality of the advanced learning environment of the future and its traditional and non-traditional permutations. The University of Alberta can be producers, not only consumers, of the future of post-secondary learning in Canada. By committing to these recommendations with significant investment, research focus prioritization, and long-term support, the leadership of the University of Alberta will create a powerful legacy that will positively impact the future of Alberta, western Canada, and the nation for decades to come.

Appendix 1

Committee Members

Mike Carbonaro, Professor, Associate Chair & Undergraduate Coordinator, Educational Psychology

Dustin Chelen, Student & Students' Union Vice President Academic

Jennifer Chesney, Associate Vice-President, University Digital Strategy (co-chair)

Sean Gouglas, Associate Professor, Humanities Computing and Director, Interdisciplinary Studies

Heather Kanuka, Professor, Educational Policy Studies and Academic Director, Centre for Teaching and Learning

Bob Luth, Professor & Associate Chair, Earth and Atmospheric Sciences

Jonathan Schaeffer, Professor & Dean, Faculty of Science (co-chair)

Christie Schultz, Executive Director, Learning Engagement Office, Faculty of Extension

Connie Varnhagen, Professor & Academic Director, Undergraduate Research Initiative, Psychology