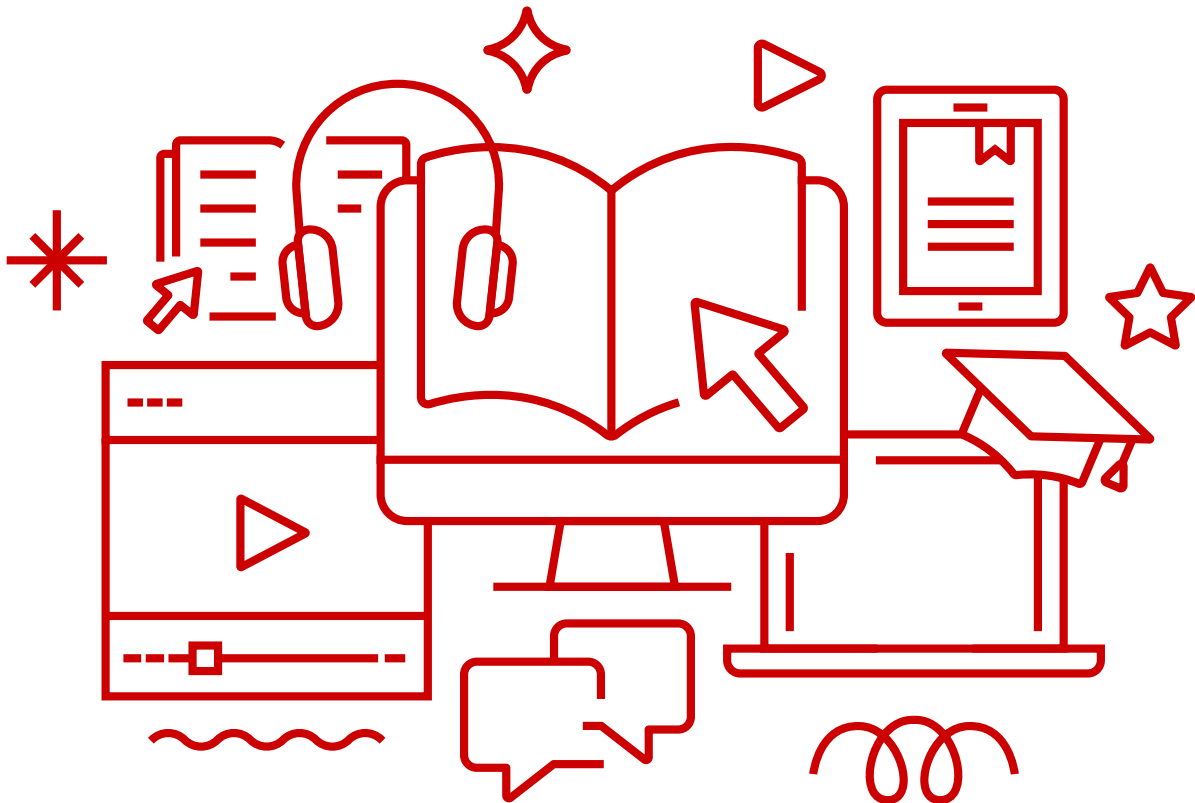


NC STATE
UNIVERSITY

College of Agriculture
and Life Sciences



CALS Distance Education Strategic Plan

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Summary

Distance education is here to stay! As the country's population is becoming more diverse and older, and as broadband capabilities are increasing, so will the need for distance education. Today's learners have come to expect education in real time that helps them meet their career and personal goals. In order to meet those expectations, universities must adapt and offer new models of education.

As more institutions of higher education increase distance learning opportunities to meet the needs of today's learners, one very important word comes to mind – flexibility. As stated in a recent study, *The Tensions Between Student Dropout and Flexibility in Learning Design: The Voices of Professors in Open Online Higher Education*: “flexibility is considered the most crucial element of part-time distance learning. Flexible learning addresses the differences in needs, preferences, and skills between students by providing them different choices regarding what, where, when, why, and how to learn, supporting personalized learning and a student-centered approach” (Soffer et al., 2019). With access to content from anywhere at any time and on any device, distance learners can stay connected and achieve their educational goals without even stepping foot on campus.

The College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at NC State recognizes the potential in distance education, and strives to be a leader of quality and innovation. A key component to success in distance learning is quality. Hurdles around quality DE include low student engagement, lack of instructional support, training and DE resources, course quality and the overall effectiveness of distance learning. A recent 2022 article, “Opportunities and Pitfalls of Physical Experimentation in Distance Learning,” states that the lack of digital resources, digital skills and distance learning experience are also pitfalls along with several other pitfalls related to content and methodology of distance learning and the use of technical means during distance learning (Holec, et al. 2022). With so many challenges to consider, how CALS navigates ways to enhance distance education efforts is critical to the success of our DE students, faculty and staff. Innovation in course offerings will also impact the access of underserved students and will create a new future of meeting the learner needs.

In order to create the future of distance education for our college, we must have a plan. Based on the input collected in our planning, this CALS DE strategic plan was created to identify best practices and recommendations for future DE endeavors.

The College of Agriculture and Life Sciences Distance Education Strategic Plan consists of four major goals:

- > **Goal 1:** Elevate quality distance education instruction
- > **Goal 2:** Improve innovative educational access for non-traditional adult learners and underserved audiences
- > **Goal 3:** Increase CALS distance program interest through enhanced communications and marketing
- > **Goal 4:** Improve attitudes about distance education's value in the college

Creating a Distance Education Plan

The CALS Distance Education (DE) strategic plan is the first step towards determining the future of DE for the college. If the COVID pandemic taught us anything, it is that we can now view distance education as a powerful approach to reaching students. As Holec, et al., 2022 suggests, COVID taught us that DE is “is possible and relatively quickly feasible.” This shift has increased the impact for reaching new audiences, creating higher quality distance education learning and has promoted rethinking in how we teach.

The College of Agriculture and Life Sciences is committed to continuing the advancement of distance education. The four goals identified in this plan will guide the future efforts of distance education at the college level and guide us in exploring ways in which to strengthen distance learning services.

The plan was created by using a number of data collection processes. Writers reviewed current literature on best practices in distance education, reviewed student evaluations related to DE services and conducted a comprehensive needs assessment with CALS DE faculty and staff. The results of the survey were shared with multiple stakeholders and the plan was reviewed by the DE committee and CALS leadership. For more information about the methodology of this plan, view Appendix F.

Distance education in CALS was excellent before the pandemic, and continues to improve and evolve as we settle into “the new normal.” The innovation from faculty and staff has been outstanding. We share this plan now with the hope that we will continue to build upon past successes and grow distance education in our college. We celebrate where we are with distance education and look forward to what the future holds for distance education in the college.



Distance Education Goals

The CALS Distance Education Strategic Plan includes four goals. These goals were identified based on the most recent literature on best practices in DE education, DE student survey data and the CALS DE strategic plan needs assessment. For additional information about the supporting literature included in each goal, please view Appendix G.

Goal 1 Elevate quality distance education instruction

The research on distance education shows that quality is key. A recent study shows that quality distance instruction promotes a healthy virtual learning environment and increases positive learning outcomes. A learner's needs can be fulfilled in the online classroom and also may encompass some benefits for the learner, including increased cultural awareness among others. (Kim Hua, et al., 2021, para. 4). All in all, quality instruction is significant in creating a conducive virtual learning environment, particularly in higher education.

“All courses should require faculty training. Not necessarily OCIP or QM certification, but a minimum requirement that each course generates a course map and that all content is reviewed by the department for accuracy and rigor.”

– CALS DE Needs Assessment

The college plans to ensure quality distance education by implementing three strategies: partnering with DELTA, supporting innovation and incentivizing teaching best practices. Faculty suggested that support is needed in improving online learner engagement and expressed a lack of awareness of DELTA's educational offerings of quality instruction. Faculty also said they would like to have more flexibility with how incentives awarded from DELTA for efforts towards quality instruction are applied.

- **Strategy 1:** Increase awareness and access of the DELTA's training opportunities and incentives.
 - Bring awareness to DELTA Grants for course redesign, course review and course exploration.
 - Partner with DELTA on grants that provide additional incentives for faculty pursuing QM certification for their courses.
 - Exploring innovative and effective trends for increasing engagement in the online classroom (e.g.; flipped classrooms, ungrading and new tools for video lectures) Partnering with DELTA to explore these trends in more detail.
 - Exploring more interactive multimedia opportunities through DELTA offerings.

- > **Strategy 2:** Seek out more innovative ways to support CALS Faculty with online student engagement.
 - Implement CALS DE Workshops in partnership with DELTA that address the concerns outlined in the recent 2022 CALS DE Needs Assessment.
 - Continue to explore various research outlets and strategies for effective online learning and work closely with faculty who have found success with online learning strategies to share their results with colleagues in the college.
 - Implement faculty mentor training.
- > **Strategy 3:** Explore more ways to incentivize CALS Faculty for their efforts to quality instruction and online course improvement.
 - More flexibility with how compensation for efforts towards online course improvement is distributed.
 - Exploring additional compensation opportunities for faculty participation in the CALS Online Academy.
 - Offering additional instructional support.

Goal 2 Improve innovative educational access for non-traditional adult learners and underserved audiences

As a land grant university, it is our mission to bring the research from the university to the people. While traditional education has historically required on-campus or in-person training, modern technology has made it possible to reach people where they are. The literature on this says, digital and hybrid learning spaces are the future and will continue to evolve and advance in how they bring learners together through innovative distance learning tools. These learning spaces will not only continue to improve, but will also be a driving force for entrepreneurial driven learners and will be of high interest to learners seeking job- specific skills. (Muruges, 2021).

“I would love to see more online bachelor’s degrees and programs for the public... bringing research to the people.”

– CALS DE Needs Assessment

It is also to our advantage to capitalize on DE knowing that current US demographics show a large decrease in the number of college-aged people, the article, “College Students Predicted to Fall By More Than 15% After the Year 2025” is quoted as saying, “regional four-year institutions which serve local students are expected to lose more than 11 percent of their students, from 1.43 million in 2012

to 1.27 million in 2029.” (Barshay, 2018, para. 5). This decline in the US population will force us to re-cruit and serve differently than we have in the past. Distance education is critical for a path to engage larger sects of the population and to reach underserved audiences. The college has already created an online academy that will partner with community colleges, HBCUs, and the general public to do just that.

- > **Strategy 1:** Implementation of the CALS Online Academy, which aims to serve partnering community colleges, Extension, the general public and international audiences.
- > **Strategy 2:** A focus on micro-credentialing and customized learning experiences (e.g.; meeting the needs of students seeking certifications for career advancement.).
- > **Strategy 3:** Exploring ways to provide on-demand content access as well as ways in which to catalog DE content created by way of the CALS Online Academy.
- > **Strategy 4:** Navigating ways to provide more flexibility for distance faculty and learners. (e.g.; flexible synchronous teaching hours).
- > **Strategy 5:** Increasing the number of fully online, distance education degree options.

“We are committed to leading the way in online education. Through the online academy, we are partnering with the Extension and North Carolina community colleges to provide more online opportunities for everyone.”

– John Dole, CALS Interim Dean

Goal 3 Increase CALS distance program interest through enhanced communications and marketing.

I bet most of us reading this can remember seeing an advertisement for Capella University, Southern New Hampshire or Arizona State, three of the top DE schools in the country. Marketing distance education is essential, especially if we want to reach audiences that have previously been missed. In a recent study published in the Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice, it was suggested that marketing the vision of distance education is effective at gaining new students and bringing back students who may not want to return to campus. The study went on to point out that “quality is not enough to attract or to maintain loyal behaviors” (Matarranz, 2021, et al., para. 13). The quality of distance education in the college is critical, but in order to best tell the story of the opportunities in CALS and the vision of DE in the college, we propose strategies to improve DE program awareness.

“I would like to see our expertise shared as broadly as possible. One important aspect is to encourage DE programs and not just courses.”

– CALS DE Needs Assessment

> **Strategy 1:** Increase CALS DE Program Awareness

- In partnership with CALS Communications and NC State Online, support programs in implementing program specific marketing strategies (e.g.; drip campaigns, social media marketing strategies).
- Develop a centralized page for DE and DE academic programs on the CALS academic website.
- Regular website updates and regular communication with CALS DE Coordinators and DELTA.
- Bring awareness to available NC State Online Marketing Opportunities (e.g.; Mini RFP's, DELTA Grants).

Goal 4 **Improve attitudes about distance education's value in the college.**

A common misperception is that DE is subpar; however, science is clear that DE can be high quality and builds skill sets that face-to-face learning may not be able to provide, including learning new technology. In a recent study published in the North American Colleges and Teachers of Agriculture Journal (NACTA), it was stated that “the biggest perceived gains in student learning were in time management skills, improved technology and communication skills, and adapting to both personal and academic challenges.” (Hendrickson, et al., 2021, p. 17). Sharing more insights into how the college is succeeding in distance education is key. The college has made great strides in the realm of DE, having conversations around the positive impact DE has had on teaching and learning is critical to improving attitudes about distance education in the college.

- > **Strategy 1:** Promote the science of the effectiveness of distance education.
- > **Strategy 2:** Share and celebrate the accomplishments of CALS Faculty committed to quality distance education efforts.
 - Acknowledgement of achievements in distance education in distance meetings and at faculty recognition award ceremonies.
- > **Strategy 3:** Continued research and exploration in new distance education trends.
- > **Strategy 4:** Share the DE experiences of CALS DE teaching faculty, DE experts and DE Students.
 - Create a space to share the DE experiences of CALS DE teaching faculty, staff and students and bring awareness to the CALS Online Academy efforts through regularly scheduled DE related webinars, panels and/or lunch and learns.

- **Strategy 5:** Build strong partnerships with various DE stakeholders as a way to share the successes and challenges of DE in the college and university-wide.
 - Work closely with the CALS DE Committee to gain insight into the distance teaching experience in the college.
 - Foster strong partnerships with NC State DELTA specialists to gain support and to help share the stories of DE successes college-wide and university-wide.
 - Work closely with CALS Communications to promote DE, DE research, and efficacy language.

*“Greater integration of online and non-programs,
increased recognition of the role/value of online programs.”*

“How to tell the story of rigor; convincing that online is so needed.”

Conclusion

It is our hope that the CALS Distance Education Strategic Plan will be a helpful resource for pioneering success in distance education in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. As technology continues to evolve and advance, we hope to stay up to date with distance education trends that best support our online teaching and learning. More importantly, it is critical to not only set the standards for quality and rigor in distance education, but also honor and acknowledge the successes, experiences and efforts our faculty, staff and students have taken pre and post pandemic in distance education. These are the groups that make distance learning possible in the college.

Distance education has cemented itself as the norm for many higher education institutions, and it is important to recognize the work CALS faculty, staff and students have done to make distance programs in the college what they are today and what they will be in the future. Distance education can build community, and community is the heart and soul of the stories shared about the flexibility, accessibility, and usability of distance learning. Distance education makes it possible for people to take advantage of educational opportunities not available in their area and can reach many audiences from all walks of life, no matter their location or work schedule. Distance education/learning programs make it possible for people to reach their professional and educational goals. Let’s continue our efforts in improving the quality by utilizing the resources NC State DELTA offers for online course improvement. Let’s partner with CALS Communications to tell the stories of distance education from the lens of our students, staff and faculty and really share the distance learning experiences happening in the college, while also making intentional efforts to connect with non-traditional and underserved audiences. Let’s share the success stories of distance learning throughout the college and foster positive attitudes about the future of distance teaching and learning.

**Appendix A:
Full List of Current CALS DE Programs**

go.ncsu.edu/cals-de-programs

**Appendix B:
The CALS Online Academy**

go.ncsu.edu/cals-online-academy

**Appendix C:
CALS Distance Education Needs Assessment Summary Report**

go.ncsu.edu/CALS-DE-NeedsAssessmentReport

**Appendix D:
CALS DE Needs Assessment Summary of Qualitative Data**

go.ncsu.edu/CALS-DE-Needs-Assessment-Qualitative-Data

Appendix E: Student Evaluation of DE Services

2015 go.ncsu.edu/DE-services-student-evaluation-2015

2016 go.ncsu.edu/DE-services-student-evaluation-2016

2017 go.ncsu.edu/DE-services-student-evaluation-2017

2018 go.ncsu.edu/DE-services-student-evaluation-2018

**Appendix F:
Methodology**

go.ncsu.edu/DE-Methodology

**Appendix G:
DE Literature/Research**

go.ncsu.edu/DE-Literature-and-Research

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