Distance Education has had a number of formats over the years. Correspondence classes by mail; video courses as this technology became available – which has more recently been replaced with podcasts; and now we have the Internet, which allows for web-based courses to be offered.

At College of Marin an online or media-based course or course section is defined as one in which 100% of instruction occurs at a distance; and while there is no face-to-face instruction, mandatory face-to-face orientations and assessments may be scheduled. Hybrid courses are defined as one in which regularly scheduled face-to-face classroom time is replaced consistently throughout the semester by required online activities; and is one in which the face-to-face component is between 40% and 60% of the total course hours. The Course Outline of Record must match the face-to-face course outline in content, rigor and depth.

People often make the mistake of thinking that an online course – by nature of it having no walls - literally or figuratively – will be as effective with 500 students as it would be with 25. We would like to respectfully disagree. While 500+ students could access the materials of a course or watch a series of podcasts, this by no means translates into effective pedagogy. The requirement from WASC, the Chancellor's Office, and articulating universities is that the class be equal in rigor and depth as its face-to-face counterpart. This is impossible for one teacher to do without a tremendous amount of support. The universities such as UC Berkeley have Graduate Student Instructors who read, interact with students, create assessments and assignments and even grade sections of large classes whether face to face or online.

The faculty at College of Marin are being trained to use Moodle – a Learning Management System which has provided the platform for our fully online and hybrid course offerings since the summer of 2011. As of this semester, Moodle also provides an online space for faculty in all classes to post syllabi, readings, assignments, video and website links and communicate with their students.

This is a new tool, which takes time to learn and to effectively adapt to our classes. The Academic Senate firmly believes that, while online distance education classes have tremendous potential, it is vitally important to have a strong infrastructure first. Instructors need training in course design using Moodle, pedagogy and ADA compliance. The college must be able to assist online students with counseling support, research/library needs and online tutoring. The Senate does not support rapid expansion of our course offerings before our skills and support services are ready. This kind of expansion would be at the expense of our students. The DE Plan offers a systematic approach to solving these issues.

It is tempting to think that Distance Education could solve various problems, such as space, productivity etc. But I would postulate that it is only a tool. I want to remind you that we are here for Community College students. Some say that the younger generation has used computers since a very young age. This is often true. But using a computer and using our minds are two different things. Students are coming out of the high schools across California underprepared in English and Math. Interaction with a teacher and classmates is vital to their growth. The community colleges are here to teach students to think critically, to problem-solve, to interact with each other. This is education with a capital E. It can be done face-to-face and online in well-thought-out, reasonably-sized classes where the teacher can not only provide content, but create opportunities for student interaction, and give adequate feedback and guidance to each and every student.

--Sara McKinnon, Academic Senate President