The CUNY Online Baccalaureate

Planned to start in Fall 2006 with 300 students, the CUNY Online Baccalaureate is intended for "degree completers," students who began college but have been unable to complete their degree work. A variety of life pressures, from work to family obligations, mean classroom-based instruction isn't an option for these students. With this key exception – that the only way they can complete their degree is online – they are just the students targeted by CUNY's mission: students given access to higher education who would otherwise be denied that opportunity.

The CUNY Online Baccalaureate is not just a perfect mission fit for CUNY– a means of giving access and opportunity to students now outside the constituencies served by the existing campuses – but it is in every way to be a regular CUNY degree, developed and delivered by CUNY faculty, if distinctive in its mode of delivery. The School of Professional Studies is the ideal place for the degree; the relatively new school, now two years old, already has a track record of working with CUNY faculty to deliver quality instruction entirely to their satisfaction, and to do this quickly, flexibly, with careful attention to support services (so critical in this venture). SPS will be able to draw on online instruction throughout CUNY but also to provide it with a single support structure, ensuring that students get the support they need to succeed.

A half decade of exemplary work in online instruction and course development means CUNY has rich resources to mine for this degree: hundreds of instructors have undergone extensive faculty development for online instruction, many of whom can now claim years of experience with multiple courses in online formats. Developed by such CUNY faculty, this degree's curriculum will be one in which features of online learning—computer-mediated communication, interactive inquiry, use of web-based resources—will give an added dimension to instruction. Still, forging existing and prospective online courses into a rigorous, coherent, quality curriculum is a challenge. The Steering Committee for Online Resources and Education (SCORE) has been meeting since the start of 2005 to consider issues of curriculum, policy, and resource management posed by such a degree. Faculty from SCORE have volunteered to serve on advisory committees to take such thinking further, but final decisions must rest with the SPS Curriculum Committee (yet to be named), and approved by the SPS Governing Committee.

The Chancellor himself has proposed that the CUNY Online Baccalaureate be developed, taught, and overseen by full-time CUNY faculty who have joint appointments, both at their home campus and in SPS. It is important that these joint appointments are for service – things like curriculum development and oversight, teaching evaluation, and so on – as well as for some teaching, so that a joint appointment might entail one course a year, for instance, plus committee service. The exact nature of these joint appointments is being worked out (one challenge is to avoid making instruction in the online degree happen at the expense of the colleges' teaching resources), but the decision to make joint appointments has been made and will be implemented.

To round out offerings and accommodate growth, the online degree will tap other CUNY faculty with experience teaching online, contracting them to develop courses for the program and paying them to teach these courses as adjuncts in keeping with the University rules on faculty pay. As the program grows, it will add not just other adjunct faculty but also full-time faculty, not just as joint appointments, but as full-time positions teaching in the CUNY Online Baccalaureate.