Undoubtedly, you are aware that online education is an issue of significant interest in higher education with topics such as MOOC’s (massive open online courses), "flipped" classrooms, and hybrid learning gaining national attention (for an example, see http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/03/education/edlife/online-education-as-an-agent-of-transformation.html). At Cal Poly, the issue of online learning seems to be mired in controversy and misinformation, limiting our capacity to explore opportunities for utilizing its potential to support Cal Poly's core mission. We need to move beyond this present state of affairs towards a campus strategy of leveraging technology to support student success and learning.

To get started, it would be helpful if some of the rumors and misinformed perceptions that seem to pervade campus conversations were addressed. Some of the incorrect assumptions that hinder our progress are:

- Online education is poor quality: the quality of the student experience in an online environment can be very high, or it can be very low. It depends on how well that experience has been designed and the quality of the instructor who's offering it. With the high quality of our faculty, and the resources available in the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology (CTLT), Cal Poly is capable of developing high quality learning experiences in an online environment. Furthermore, all online courses are required to be reviewed and approved by faculty curriculum committees at the department and college level, and by the Academic Senate Curriculum committee. We have processes in place to ensure the high quality of our curriculum, regardless of modality.

- Online education conflicts with our learn by doing culture: our university has already demonstrated that students often experience our learn by doing culture outside the classroom. There’s no reason why our learn by doing experiential pedagogy could not be facilitated in an online environment, provided that the specific learning objectives can be achieved and measured. Interactive simulations, "take it with you" projects and activities, and remote sensing applications are just a few examples of how our learn by doing pedagogy could actually be strengthened, expanded, and reinforced in an online environment.

- Cal Poly faculty are being forced to move their courses online: of the approximately 4,000 courses in Cal Poly's catalog, only 17 are, at present, approved to be delivered in a hybrid or online format. Online learning will never replace the residential experience at Cal Poly; it needs to complement that experience.
- Faculty lose their intellectual property (IP) rights if they develop online courses: the administrative leadership of Cal Poly does not want to take faculty's IP. Some faculty seem to attribute this concern about IP to the stipends offered by Extended Education to faculty who converted their face-to-face classes to an online format for summer term. The agreement that faculty who accepted this stipend signed explicitly states: "As with other course materials created in the normal course of academic employment, the faculty member shall retain full ownership rights to use any course or course materials developed under this agreement."

Putting aside these misinformed beliefs, let's now consider some of the important reasons why Cal Poly needs to strengthen and broaden its online educational offerings:

- Our students are digital natives and expect to spend time learning online: in addition, our students are likely to experience online learning and training environments in their future careers, so we need to prepare them to succeed in careers that require online learning skills.

- Our students are already taking online courses...lots of them: many of our students are already enrolling in online courses at other universities and transferring those credits to Cal Poly. If we do not provide a suitable selection of online courses at Cal Poly, our students will continue to take those courses elsewhere. Given the choice, students tell us that they'd rather take those courses at Cal Poly, but without an online option, they cannot.

- Online learning can facilitate our implementation of the teacher-scholar model: properly designed online courses provide faculty with scheduling and geographic flexibility to pursue research, scholarship, and creative activities. We already have examples of how online classes have enabled our faculty to travel away from campus during the academic session, and to manage their schedules to accommodate scholarly opportunities they would not have been able to pursue if they were committed to a face-to-face course.

- Online learning can accommodate student success: this is the most important consideration that should drive our development of more online courses. With greater availability of online courses, students will have more flexibility to get the classes they need, even if they have scheduling conflicts during the day that hinder their ability to take as many face-to-face courses as they need. Also, student athletes and others who are required to miss live class sessions could benefit from an online learning environment that affords greater flexibility of time and location for learning. Having a robust selection of online courses in the summer can also enable students to make substantive progress to degree even while traveling, living at home to save money, pursuing internships, or working to earn money for school.

As a campus community, we are capable of doing better than we are now in developing online courses and programs. Because of our exceptional faculty, staff, and students, we can create high quality online courses to support student and faculty success. You are encouraged to give careful consideration to how your department and college can initiate online course development. If you need resources or other support to make this happen, please communicate those needs to your college dean so that we can develop a plan to support your success.