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ACCEPtS: An Alliance for Cooperative Course Sharing in the Plant Sciences

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With reductions in resources available for teaching and the loss of faculty teaching positions over time, curricula in the plant agricultural sciences have been under significant pressure (Robertson, 2006). In many cases, course offerings were downsized, and very often when faculty positions were not filled, or filled under a different job description with a research emphasis, courses were eliminated (Harl, 2003). This phenomenon has resulted in less diverse and thorough curricula in the undergraduate plant agricultural sciences at many universities. Colleges of agriculture often have had difficulty in offering important core classes (e.g., plant physiology, plant nutrition, and plant anatomy) that serve as the building blocks for more advanced classes. This has been particularly true for smaller colleges of agriculture that have fewer faculty and teaching resources from which to draw. As science and job markets have changed, the need for new courses and changes to curricula to address these emerging issues has arisen. However, with limited faculty and resources, many colleges of agriculture have often been unable to develop and to offer courses to meet new educational needs or priorities (e.g., water management, international agriculture markets, and secondary uses of plants). Additionally, some courses, although very important to the plant agricultural science curriculum, often

have had low student numbers per class (sometimes by design or necessity) and have thus been considered an inefficient use of teaching resources.

To address these problems, the University of Arkansas, Louisiana State University, Mississippi State University, and Oklahoma State University (participating institutions) created the Alliance for Cooperative Course Exchange in the Plant Sciences (ACCEPtS). The ACCEPtS program served as the mechanism for the participating institutions to share teaching resources and to use those teaching resources to develop, maintain, and share courses in the plant agricultural sciences. By participating in this course exchange program, the institutions were able to reduce course duplication, offer students courses taught by experts in the subject matter, jointly develop core courses as well as courses related to emerging issues that they would otherwise have been unable to offer students, and increase the efficiency with which they used teaching resources. Sharing of courses through ACCEPtS allowed each institution to maintain significant flexibility and to use the courses as best serves the needs of their respective students and institutions.

Materials and methods

To initiate the ACCEPtS program, an operating agreement was developed by the participating institutions that delineated how the institutions would interact, institutional responsibilities, and the responsibilities of the ACCEPtS Coordinating Committee, which was charged with managing the program. The Institute for Academic Alliances [IAA (Kansas State University, Manhattan)] worked with ACCEPtS as a contracted partner. Using their specialized Expansis software, IAA provided unified course enrollment information, invoices for tuition billing among the institutions, grade dissemination, and annual reports.

Although the ACCEPtS Coordinating Committee (composed of two representatives from each of the participating institutions) was responsible for overseeing operations according to the ACCEPtS by-laws, IAA handled the mechanics involved in course sharing and information exchange.

Courses that were shared among the institutions were referred to as ACCEPtS courses. Students registering for an ACCEPtS course being taught by faculty at an institution other than the student's home institution were referred to as ACCEPtS students. All ACCEPtS courses were listed by each participating institution according to that institution's catalog name and number. Each institution decided the appropriate course level and numbering system for each course based upon the syllabus and course description provided by the instructor. Each institution approved the courses and included them in their respective catalogs and used the courses in their respective curricula as each department chose. Therefore, departments within the plant sciences had the flexibility to use the courses as best served the needs of their institutions and students.

Because students registered for ACCEPtS courses at their home institution and under their home institution's catalog numbers, these courses were considered to be on-campus resident courses and problems related to the transfer of courses or courses taken late in a student's career being taken off-campus were avoided. Students paid tuition at the rate at which they would pay for traditional on-campus courses at their respective institution. Although students at different institutions paid different tuition rates for the same course, the tuition was the same as if the courses were taught on-campus with traditional delivery methods.

All student policies related to registration, withdrawals, tuition refunds, discipline, and appeals were those of the student's home institution. During the first four semesters of operation, only two issues occurred. These issues were handled through discussions among the instructor, the instructor of record at the receiving institution, and the student. In these cases, the issues were resolved. If the issues had not been resolved, the instructor or student would have had the option of pursuing the grievance or disciplinary action

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