Strengthening the Online Student Learning Environment
At Montgomery Community College
Executive Summary

Developing the Topic

To determine the topic for the MCC Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), a Planning Committee was selected by the President's Cabinet that included primarily faculty representatives, as well as representatives from the College Administration, Curriculum Administration, Institutional Effectiveness, Student Services, the Library, Marketing, and Continuing Education. The QEP Planning Committee conducted a series of surveys of students, faculty, staff, administration, and Board of Trustees to help determine an area that was of interest to and would have significant impact on the college community. From those surveys, it was determined that the topic of the QEP would be in the area of online learning.

Implementation

The QEP Implementation Committee identified English (ENG 111), religion (REL 211), psychology (PSY 150), and computer (CIS 110) courses to pilot QEP activities. These courses are offered every semester and generally taught by the same instructor. QEP implementation action items include a new online student learning orientation, a student self-assessment for online learning readiness, interventions for students for identified deficiencies, professional development for faculty teaching online courses, a faculty self-assessment for online teaching readiness, interventions for faculty for identified deficiencies, and increased online instructional resources for faculty. The action items will be implemented in stages during the first two years of the QEP, with constant re-evaluation and re-design occurring as issues are identified through the process. Full implementation of QEP intervention strategies into all online courses will occur at the beginning of Year 3.

Assessment

Student learning will be measured through pre-test and post-test data from technical skills inventory of students and information gathered from the student learning Outcome Assessment Reports for the identified online courses. These data will be collected for each selected course throughout the implementation of the QEP, including Year 1 baseline data prior to the implementation of any intervention strategies. This methodology will allow comparisons to be made of technical skills and student learning outcomes, both prior to and after the intervention strategies with minimal extraneous effects.

Course attrition rates and failure rates will also be used as measures of the success of intervention strategies. Measures will include an analysis of faculty, staff, and student perceptions gathered from opinion surveys. Additional surveys will be used to measure the success of orientations, training, workshops, and seminars.

Questions regarding development or implementation of this QEP should be directed to Cindy Ellison, Dean, Technology & Learning Resources at ellisonc@montgomery.edu

QEP Initial Goals/Intended Outcomes

The QEP initial goals and intended outcomes are listed in the following table. Modifications made to outcomes in the third column are explained in the next section, QEP Modifications.

Initial Goal	No	Intended Outcome
To ensure that online students are prepared to successfully complete an online course.	1	100% of the online students will complete the online student orientation. *Modified, Year 2 to* 100% of **new** online students will complete the online orientation.
	2	80% of the students will pass the online competency pre-test with a score of 70% or better. *Modified, Year 2 to* 80% of the students completing the Online Orientation Course will be evaluated as suited to distance learning on the personalized Distance Learning Readiness Plan evaluation instrument.
	3	*Deleted, Year 2* 80% of the students will pass the online post-test with a score of 80% or better.
To ensure the rate of student success and grades in online classes improves.	4	78% of students taking online courses will be successful.
To ensure that online faculty are prepared to teach in an online environment.	5	Faculty will receive regular communications about available online teaching resources. *Modified, Year 2 to* Online courses will be improved through a Peer Review Process.
	6	100% of the online faculty will receive professional development in online course development and delivery.
	7	80% of online faculty will demonstrate a set of skills for teaching in an online environment.
	8	Faculty online teaching skills will be assessed for quality improvement.

QEP Modifications

In the first year, the visiting SACSCOC Review Committee recommended the institution replace our original second goal, "to ensure that online students are learning course content in the online

learning environment" with "to ensure the rate of student success and grades in online classes improves" in order to provide clarity and a measurable goal.

MCC reviewed three years of historical data, comparing traditional seated classes and online classes for the same course. These data were reviewed and analyzed, and the analysis showed that we offered an almost equal number of traditional to online sections during that time period. Twenty-two percent (22%) of the traditional seated students failed to succeed, compared to thirty-two percent (32%) of the online students. These data were used to establish the baseline, 78% of students taking online courses will be successful. Success is defined as a final grade of A, B, or C, whereas failed to succeed is defined as grades of D, F, FA, W, or I.

Additionally, the QEP Implementation Committee revised its timeline to provide greater detail, target dates, or responsible parties for identified milestones. Further, the revised timeline provided for full implementation late in Year 2 or early in Year 3. The improved momentum allows the College to do assessments and improvements earlier in the execution of the QEP and to better track implementation.

In Year 2 (2014-2015), the wording of the 1st intended outcome was changed to read: *"Each semester, 100% of NEW online students will complete the online orientation for online student learners."* The QEP Implementation Committee recognized that repeating students did not need to take the online orientation each and every semester.

The QEP Implementation Committee decided after the piloting of a student self-assessment in summer of 2014, that having students complete a pre- and a post-test was redundant for the student and did not provide meaningful data for the committee. Furthermore, the summer 2014 pilot was a self-assessment and not a true assessment of student readiness for online learning. As such, a personalized Distance Learning Readiness Plan was created and placed within the Online Orientation Course that was deployed to all new *online* students via Blackboard Learning Management System for each semester. Additionally, the 2nd intended outcome wording has been modified to "*80% of the students completing the Online Orientation Course will be evaluated as suited to distance learning on the personalized Distance Learning Readiness Plan evaluation instrument."* As a result of these changes, the 3rd intended outcome concerning student post-testing was discontinued.

Data sources for the 5th intended outcome were modified to remove non-existent data sources and to add newly identified data sources. The 7th intended outcome also had new data sources identified and added.

In Year 3 (2015-2016), during the assessment of the 5th intended outcome, it was recognized that this outcome as written, was not easily measurable. Further, "online teaching resources" was not defined at the start of the QEP and was open to various interpretations. Thus, it was decided that the wording of this intended outcome would be modified to read: *"Online courses will be improved through a Peer Review Process."*

The recently reactivated Peer Review Process identifies numerous attributes and resources that should be present in online courses. Further, the Peer Review Process provides a metric that the QEP can use to measure and monitor improvement of online courses. The intended end goal of the 5th outcome as presently written is that MCC will deliver quality online courses, which logically should result in improved student success.

There were no changes made to the QEP during Year 5.

Impact on Student Learning

MCC conducted an analysis of three-years of data (fall 2010 – spring 2013), where there existed at least one traditional seated class and one online class for the same course. MCC used the findings from this analysis to establish the baseline: "78% of students taking online courses will be successful." Success was defined as final grades of A, B, or C. Final grades of D, F, FA, W, or I equated to failing to succeed.

MCC completed this same data analysis for each fall and spring semester since, and has provided the findings in the table below.

Student Success Rates Comparative

	Baseline	Year 1		Year 2		Year 3		Year 4		Year 5	
	2010-2013	Fall 13	Spr 14	Fall 14	Spr 15	Fall 15	Spr 16	Fall 16	Spr 17	Fall 17	Spr 18
Traditional Students	78%	74%	70%	77%	81%	79%	83%	75%	82%	78%	86%
Online Students	68%	62%	68%	68%	67%	65%	66%	69%	69%	73%	75%

Year 1 and 2 of the QEP implemented actions were focused on identified piloted courses. Specifically, English, religion, psychology, and computer courses were identified by the QEP Implementation Committee where QEP implementation activities would be piloted. As of Year 3, all online courses were monitored for success, not just the piloted courses.

Specific SLO's in Pilot Courses

English, religion, psychology, and computer courses were identified by the QEP Implementation Committee where QEP implementation activities would be piloted. These courses were selected as "pilots" because each semester there were typically a traditional section and online section of courses within these categories. As such, the Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) for these courses were also SLOs for the QEP. MCC wanted the students in these classes to achieve the SLO identified target benchmark, regardless of delivery method.

When one looks at just the piloted courses SLOs for AY13-14, the assessments provided paint a different picture than the "grades by semester" analysis discussed in the preceding section. All of the online students, assessed in the piloted courses, achieved at least a 78% student learning outcome success rate. It is noteworthy to point out that SLOs are not assessed based on the final grade in a course. SLOs are assessed by the instructors of the courses using a rubric, checklist, or embedded test questions that relate to the identified SLO. Furthermore, instructors are not including "withdrawn" or "failure due to attendance" students in the SLO assessments since these students would not be "completers" of the course.

Because of the contrasting information provided by the two measures detailed above, another analysis was undertaken. MCC drilled down on the "grades by semester" analysis, looking at the specific courses and their grades for the fall and spring semesters, using the same definition of success; i.e., grades of A, B, or C equal success, and grades of D, F, FA, W, or I equal failing to succeed. Additionally, MCC further subdivided the "failing to succeed" into academic or non-academic failure categories.

Environment Supporting Student Learning Impact

Impacts on the environment supporting student learning through the course of the QEP are listed below:

Year 1 (2013-2014)

- The Student Support Services division of the College added a new student orientation that is completely online. This resource is available to all students, whether seated, hybrid, or online.

Year 2 (2014-2015)

- Computer issues identified by students via the Evaluation of Instruction survey were addressed by the Information Technology Department during fall 2014.
- The Center for Academic Technology Support/Distance Learning offered numerous in-house training opportunities to faculty; such as Excel, Word, Blackboard, etc.
- The Director of Learning Resources offered numerous training opportunities to faculty about online library resources, as well as made them aware of online professional development opportunities; such as Online Library Resources, Professional Development Opportunities related to online instruction, etc.
- The Counseling and Career Development Center created Study Halls for PSY and MAT students.
- Some outcome assessments on Student Learning Outcome Assessment Reports have analysis discussions that mention the QEP and/or QEP initiatives, indicating more instructors are thinking about the QEP on a regular basis.
- The Center for Academic Technology Support/Distance Learning created and deployed a Blackboard Orientation for students new to online learning in fall 2015.
- Student helpdesk requests started being routed to the Center for Academic Technology Support/Distance Learning.

- A "Student Help" email was created and promoted. Emails are routed to the IT department to ensure all technical issues are routed to the proper department.

Year 3 (2015-2016)

- In fall 2015, it was decided that early enrollment of new students to MCC to the Blackboard Orientation would enable them to get a head start and be better prepared. Thus, mid fall 2015 semester, all new students were immediately provided a student email, Blackboard access, and the Blackboard Orientation course.
- The Dean of Technology & Learning Resources implemented Peer Reviews of online courses. These were conducted in fall 2015 and spring 2016.
- The College has always conducted student evaluation of instruction each fall and spring semester. However, based on feedback provided to the Director of Institutional Effectiveness, it was not certain that the feedback was making its way back to each instructor. Thus, the dissemination process was changed in spring 2016 to insure the feedback is making it back to the respective faculty.
- The Professional Development Policy and related procedures were reviewed and updated in the spring of 2016. A specific criterion for faculty who teach in the online environment was added, which requires five (5) hours of professional development each year that has a "teaching online" subject matter. This was done in an effort to reinforce and to re-educate the MCC staff and faculty on the importance of professional development in the continual improvement of the College, as well as the employee individually.
- The Distance Learning Committee developed a Common Course Structure for the Blackboard Learning Management System shells. This change provided students a better-organized format where course materials and information could be more easily located.
- The Dean of Technology & Learning Resources developed an online course, "Teaching Online at MCC," which all new online instructors are required to complete.
- A review of withdrawal data in Fall 16 revealed that the College was only capturing reasons for the withdrawal in about 30% of the cases. Thus, the request that Student Services look at the withdrawal process and work toward requiring a withdrawal code so the withdrawal data could be used to identify trends and/or issues that the College may be able to remedy.
- Tutoring responsibilities were reassigned to the Counseling and Career Development Center in hopes of improving overall student success.
- The College created and hired a new position, High School Liaison that will spend 4 of 5 days per week at the high schools. This position will not only assist high school students to enroll in courses, but will also help to guide them to available resources in order to be successful in their college courses.

Year 4 (2016-2017)

- The third and fourth semesters of Online Course Peer Reviews was conducted in fall 2016 and spring 2017. Additionally, courses that underwent Peer Reviews during the first two semesters were also reviewed to see if the issues identified previously were corrected. Issues that were not corrected were reported to the Vice President of Instruction for next steps.

- The Academic Counseling Exchange ("ACE") was implemented in fall 2016. ACE is a new online academic support program that provides access to tutorial services for a variety of subject areas. Generally, online students complete their assignments or studying outside of the College's normal operating hours. Most of the support services are available online through Blackboard from 10:00 am until 4:00 am daily, including Saturdays and Sundays. ACE Coaching is the face-to-face component available on campus. The Counseling and Career Development Center is overseeing this endeavor.
- The Program Review process went through an update in 2016 and was further improved in 2017. Specifically, follow-through actions by Program Heads and/or their Deans on recommendations because of the Program Review was emphasized. Basically, a system to report on actions following recommendations was put into place.
- The College implemented a new Employee Evaluation and Professional Development Plan document. The Evaluation form includes attribute questions related to the QEP, specifically: "Improvements to online courses identified in the peer review have been satisfied" and, "For online and/or hybrid faculty: Five hours of PD obtained in the last 12 months is related to online teaching."
- The ACA 115 course underwent an update during the summer of 2016 with the "new and improved" course first being offered in fall 2016. The new ACA 115 offered a module to familiarize students with Blackboard, online course requirements, and expectations.
- The College hired a new Vice President of Instruction in July of 2016. The new Vice President of Instruction is supportive of QEP initiatives such as the Peer Review process, the Program Review process, the new evaluation form, and new online faculty (whether full-time, permanent part-time, or adjuncts) receiving appropriate training before being allowed to teach.

Year 5 (2017-2018)

- The fifth and sixth semesters of Online Course Peer Reviews was conducted in fall 2017 and spring 2018. Additionally, courses that underwent Peer Reviews during the prior years' semesters were also reviewed to see if the issues identified by the Peer Reviews were corrected. Issues that were not corrected were reported to the Vice President of Instruction for next steps.
- The Program Review process went through an update in AY16 and has been modified slightly each year to improve the process, the review, and to "close the loop" by tracking recommendations and implementation of same. Specifically related to the QEP, the Program Review recommended that any online courses that have gone through two reviews without correcting deficiencies have written goals included on their Outcome Assessment Reports to document and track progress.
- The College approved a new position for IT that will assist with digital content/multimedia in online courses. The analysis conducted as a result of the QEP (student grades, student withdrawals, student evaluations of courses and instructors, etc.) assisted the Dean of Technology & Learning Resources in justifying the need for this new position.

- Five instructors completed Wake Tech's *e-Learning Preparedness Initiative across the College* (EPIC 30) online teaching certificate during the summer semesters of 2017 and 2018. The course educates faculty to master the skills to develop accessible, engaging, and user-friendly online courses.
- A new Coordinator of Education Partnerships, formerly High School Liaison, was hired and began work with the CCP and Early College students in the spring 2018 semester. As a result, several processes have been revamped, providing a better experience for these students. For example, the Coordinator has worked closely with the high schools to ensure early registrations, which has led to more students having the necessary materials on the first day of class. Additionally, the Coordinator is well connected to the community and has a positive rapport with both the students and Montgomery County School System personnel.
- In the spring 2018 semester, using Blackboard's Retention Center, the Dean of Technology & Learning Resources began an initiative to notify students, instructors, the MCC counselors, and the Coordinator of Educational Partnerships via email when students did not meet certain risk baselines. The initiative was targeted to CCP and Early College students taking online courses, but instructors were encouraged to use the Retention Center to track all student progress in all courses. The risk table was triggered by missed deadlines, grades, and infrequent course access. Face-to-face training was offered and instructional videos were distributed for those not able to attend. In courses in which this resource was used, both the MCC counselors and Coordinator of Educational Partnerships reported the alerts were helpful in communicating with both the student and public school personnel.
- Orientations were scheduled with all new Early College students to assist with setting up accounts and using campus technologies, including Blackboard.
- Distance learning personnel visited each of the high schools in the fall 2017 semester to assist students in accessing Blackboard and email accounts.
- In spring 2018, quarterly partnership meetings between MCC and Montgomery County Schools personnel were initiated. These meetings have been helpful to communicate issues, policy changes, and other needs arising in the CCP and Early College programs.

Achievement of Goals/Anticipated Outcomes

In the third year of the QEP, the College began to see improvements in outcomes and student success as follows:

Year 3 (2015-2016)

Intended outcome #6, "100% of the online faculty will receive professional development in online course development and delivery" was met.

Year 4 (2016-2017)

One of the expected operational outcomes, "Online courses will be improved through a Peer Review Process" was met. Overall student success in online courses held at 69% for the year, 1% above the baseline.

Year 5 (2017-2018)

Two of the expected operational outcomes, "Online courses will be improved through a Peer Review Process" and "100% of the online faculty will receive professional development in online course development and delivery" were met. Overall student success in online courses increased from 69% to 73% in the fall semester, then to 75% in the spring semester.

Reflections/Lessons Learned

- The completed student learning outcomes for 2013-14 highlighted the different definition of student success utilized by instructors completing SLO assessments versus the success definition utilized when comparing final grades in traditional and online courses. The SLOs with assessments completed for the piloted courses indicates that we actually did better than we originally theorized on student learning outcome performance by online students, as compared to traditional students. Nevertheless, MCC believes there will be continuous improvement of online student success rates on SLOs.
- The grouping of the D, F, FA, W, and I grades into one failure classification was inadequate for assessment and improvement purposes going forward. The D, F, and I grades are assigned grades based on the academic performance of the student. Grades of FA (failure due to attendance) and W (withdrawal from course) indicate a failure to complete a course based on factors other than academic issues.
- The further classification of failures provides specific data for use in designing appropriate interventions aimed at the different causes of student failure.
- The percentage of W and FA students (non-academic failure) in online classes was larger than that in traditional classes. This fact negatively affects online course success.
- Based on a review of the AY15 annual report of professional development for online faculty, only 59% took some professional development related to online course development and/or delivery. This low percentage is concerning given the amount of effort that the Dean of Technology and Learning Resources and the Director of Learning Resources exhibited in making opportunities for learning known to all faculty.
- The data reporting on student success (A's, B's, and C's) is not showing any improvements after three years of QEP focus. The percentage of W and FA students (non-academic failure) in online classes is larger than that in traditional classes. This fact negatively affects online course success. By obtaining better withdrawal data or reasons, MCC may be able to curtail some of the lack of success due to withdrawals.
- As Jim Collins said in his book, *Good to Great*, having "the right people in the right seats" is key to go from good to great. The College hired a new President in 2015 and a new Vice President of Instruction in 2016. The College has made significant improvements since the addition of these committed, qualified, and data-driven individuals. Not only improvements in strengthening the online student-learning environment, but also in course scheduling, facilities, personnel, and technology.
- For future QEP's, MCC should narrow the scope of the objective as much as possible.
- Once QEP goals are drafted, require a mock run through of data and assessment, to ensure a) the goals identified are actually measureable, b) the goals affect the identified initiative, and c) data actually exists to complete the assessment(s).

- Many factors must be considered when determining student success in an individual course. Although for purposes of the QEP metrics, the College defined success as a final grade of A, B, or C, but realized with non-traditional learners, a student may withdraw to accept employment or to relocate for another opportunity. Furthermore, with the many initiatives and efforts across campus to strengthen MCC's online learning environment, it would be difficult to determine if a single implemented intervention made a positive change on student success.
- Even though every intended outcome was not fully met, MCC believes the QEP was a success. As a result of the QEP, the College developed several initiatives and good practices to build upon. In the past two years, as a result of the College's efforts, MCC realized an increase in the overall success rate of student grades.

Unanticipated Outcomes

- The High School Liaison position had been discussed outside of the QEP realm before MCC's analysis of the withdrawal data was done, but the QEP Committee is excited about the probable effect this position may also have in increasing student success in online learning.
- An academic success course (ACA-115), that is required for many of the curriculum programs, is in the process of being revamped. This course overhaul will include such topics as using Blackboard, Google Services, IT Prep for Online Students, and Web Resources. While curriculum improvement is always ongoing, this course makeover was not a planned activity of the QEP Committee, but has the potential to aid in the QEP end goal.
- The quarterly meetings between MCC & Montgomery County Schools have improved communication between the high school's distance learning administrators and MCC staff and have resolved misunderstandings related to online enrollment, course requirements, withdrawals, course material needs, and respective policies. This opportunity for open communication has enabled MCC to improve the program and better serve students' needs.