Florida Gulf Coast University

Report of the
Task Force to Develop a Strategic Plan for Online Learning

July 20, 2015

Introduction

The ad hoc Task Force to Develop a Strategic Plan for Online Learning (“the Task Force”) was initiated by FGCU Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Ron Toll. Provost Toll selected faculty appointees from the names forwarded by the Faculty Senate Appointments Team. Administrative and staff appointees were selected based on experience with or interest in online learning initiatives. Provost Toll appointed the following individuals to the Task Force:

Ms. Mary Banks, Business Technology Services
Dr. Cathy Duff, Academic and Curriculum Support (chair)
Dr. Charles Fornaciari, Lutgert College of Business
Dr. Carolynne Gischel, College of Education (vice-chair)
Ms. Karen Landy, College of Health Professions and Social Work
Ms. Danielle Rosenthal, Library Services
Mr. Mike Salmond, College of Arts and Sciences
Dr. Paul Snyder, Planning and Institutional Performance
Dr. Paul Thornton, Continuing Education and Off-Campus Programs
Dr. Janusz Zalewski, Whitaker College of Engineering

Two additional members were added to provide expertise and input on special issues:

Mr. Angel Hernandez, Student
Mr. Dave Jaeger, Web, e-Learning and Publications

Provost Toll met with the Task Force on April 18, 2014. He asked the group to make recommendations for a strategic plan for online learning that would maintain and build on what we already do well. In particular, the focus would be on improvement with an eye toward the future. These recommendations could be considered at a future time as part of a broader review of the University’s strategic plan and mission.
The Task Force began its work by reviewing the Report of the Online Distance Learning Task Force, dated April 1, 2013. This report was prepared by an ad hoc group of faculty, staff, and students who worked during the fall and spring of 2012-13 to assess the current state of institutional support services for online instruction at FGCU using the Sloan Quality Scorecard for the Administration of Online Education Programs, a recognized instrument reflecting best practices. The report included seven recommendations to enhance the online teaching-learning experience for students and faculty at FGCU:

- Student identity authentication strategies/technologies, including such things as online proctoring, should be identified and implemented that will ensure a student completing an online course is indeed the same student who enrolled in the course.
- The Teaching, Learning, and Assessment Initiative (TLAI) and the Faculty Senate’s curriculum teams should explore standards for online course design and delivery to enhance student retention and course quality beyond the current record of student success. Greater use of the Quality Matters rubric in the design of online courses should be encouraged. TLAI and faculty should develop a student perception of instruction (SPoI) especially suited to address online learning. [Note: The TLAI is now the Lucas Center for Faculty Development.]
- Web, e-Learning, and Publications (WEP) should expand its outreach to faculty with regard to disseminating information on current and emerging technologies to improve online learning.
- Faculty professional development opportunities associated with online student instruction and assessment should be greatly increased. A certification process for faculty teaching online utilizing the Quality Matters system should be established.
- Access to online student services support should be extended at critical times.
- The Enrollment Retention Management Committee of the Planning and Budget Council should examine student retention in online courses and programs, share data with relevant departments and program faculty, and recommend strategies for improvement.
- A strategic plan for online learning should be developed.

The Task Force also reviewed other reports, strategic plans, guidelines, and policies related to online learning. These included the following:

- Florida Board of Governors. Learning Management System (LMS) presentation to Innovation and Online Learning Committee. November 6, 2014.
- Florida Virtual Campus. Members Council on Distance Learning and Student Services, Statewide LMS Survey: Results Report. October 8, 2014.
- Online Learning at FGCU. Presentation to the Innovation and Online Committee, Florida Board of Governors, by Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Ron Toll. May 8, 2014.
- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. Distance and Correspondence Education Policy Statement. Edited January 2012.
- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. Guidelines for Addressing Distance and Correspondence Education. A Guide for Evaluators Charged with Reviewing Distance and Correspondence Education. December 2011.
- Distance Learning Strategic Plan: An Assessment of the Implementation Status as of December 29, 1998. Prepared by the FGCU Distance Learning Steering Committee.

**Common Language**

As a relatively new and constantly developing field, there are no universally agreed upon definitions for terms associated with online and distance learning. The lack of a common language often hampers the ability to communicate effectively. Staff at the State University System of Florida (SUS), Florida Board of Governors are leading an effort to review and update definitions used by public universities in Florida.

At FGCU, the term *online* is used to describe (a) programs that are available fully online, (b) courses that are part of a fully online program, and (c) other course sections that are offered fully online or in hybrid format, which means that 50% to 79% of the instruction is delivered using some form of technology, when time and/or space separate the student and instructor.
These various online delivery methods require similar faculty training, preparation, and support.

Preliminary fall 2015 data illustrate the impact of online learning at FGCU:

- Online courses represent approximately 11.4% of the total course sections offered fall 2015, with slightly more than one-third (4%) offered in association with fully online programs.
- Of the 624 faculty/adjuncts teaching this fall 2015, approximately 163 (26%) are teaching at least one online section.

For the purpose of this report, the terms online and distance are considered to be interchangeable. Nonetheless, the following definitions are provided to demonstrate the range of understandings related to online and distance learning:

**Distance education:** For the purpose of accreditation review by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, distance education is defined as a formal educational process in which the majority of the instruction (interaction between students and instructors and among students) in a course occurs when students and instructors are not in the same place. Instruction may be synchronous or asynchronous. A distance education course may use the internet; one-way and two-way transmissions through open broadcast, closed circuit, cable, microwave, broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite, or wireless communications devices; audio conferencing; or video cassettes, DVD’s, and CD-ROMs if used as part of the distance learning course or program.

**Distance learning course:** Florida Statute 1009.24(17) defines a distance learning course as one in which at least 80 percent of the direct instruction is delivered using some form of technology when the student and instructor are separated by time or space, or both. This definition is associated with the per-credit-hour distance learning course fee that may be assessed by a state university.

**Distance learning program:** The purpose of completing the 2015 Survey of Academic Programs Offered via Distance Learning for the Florida Board of Governors, a distance learning program is one in which (a) all of the courses necessary to complete the program (degree or certificate), or (b) all of the upper division courses required to complete the upper division requirements for a baccalaureate program are offered as distance learning courses.

**Hybrid course:** A course in which 50% to 79% of the instruction is delivered using some form of technology, when time and/or space separate the student and instructor (current definition used in the SUS).
Online learning: For the purpose of a review conducted for the U.S. Department of Education, online learning was defined as learning that takes place partially or entirely over the Internet. This definition excludes purely print-based correspondence education, broadcast television or radio, videoconferencing, videocassettes, and stand-alone educational software programs that do not have a significant Internet-based instructional component. (Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practice in Online Learning: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies. September 2010. https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/tech/evidence-based-practices/finalreport.pdf )

Traditional (and technology enhanced) course: A course in which face-to-face instruction is the primary mode of instruction and utilization of some form of technology for delivery of supplemental course materials constitutes no more than 49% of overall course instruction. In a traditional course, classroom attendance requirement is not reduced due to integration of technology (current definition used in the SUS).

Community Engagement

In order to ensure stakeholder input, the Task Force communicated with and sought feedback from the University community throughout the process. These interactions included the following activities:

- Presentation to the Faculty Senate, November 14, 2014.
- Regular updates provided to the Faculty Senate Technology Team by Task Force members who were also members of the Faculty Senate Technology Team.
- Communication with Faculty Senate Ad Hoc Committee on the Future Direction of Quality Education, which presented a report on quality in online learning to the Faculty Senate on May 10, 2015.
- In-person town hall meetings held February 19 and 23, 2015. Meetings included roundtable discussions and requests for input and feedback from participants.
- Adobe Connect facilitated town hall meeting held February 25, 2015.
- Request for comments and feedback through a web-based survey.
- Focused questions included on a student survey administered by the Office of Web, e-Learning, and Publications during November 2014.

Discussion and Recommendations

The Task Force reviewed all input and feedback received from these interactions. Further, the Task Force analyzed these data for common themes. In comparing stakeholder input with documents and reports previously reviewed by the Task Force, four main cluster areas emerged:
These four areas are discussed below, followed by recommendations from the Task Force.

**Organizational Structure**

*Discussion of Organizational Structure*

At this time, FGCU activities that support online and distance learning are distributed across numerous administrative units. Areas of expertise regarding online and distance learning already exist on campus, but no specific unit coordinates or provides leadership for these activities. This distributed organizational structure was described in the Compliance Certification for reaffirmation of accreditation submitted by FGCU in fall 2014 to the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACSCOC).

During the reaffirmation process, FGCU reviewed its distance learning programs and courses and demonstrated compliance with applicable SACSCOC standards. The following items describe how FGCU complies with specific SACSCOC policies related to distance learning:

- The student who registers in a distance course or program is the same student who participates in and completes the course or program to receive the corresponding credit. This is accomplished through assignment of a secure login and password to each individual student. This login is required to access CANVAS, the University’s learning management system.
- The privacy of students enrolled in distance courses or programs is protected through the assignment of a unique student identification number and secure login processes. Faculty, staff, and student works are also required to read and sign a “Confidentiality of Student Records Agreement.” Records are managed, maintained, and protected by the Office of the Registrar and subject to privacy and confidentiality procedures.
- FGCU students incur no additional charges associated with the verification of student identity. Students would be informed if there were additional charges.
- The University provides an accurate headcount of distance enrollment in the annual Institutional Profile submitted to SACSCOC.
- Distance education courses and programs comply with the SACSCOC Principles of Accreditation. This requirement applies to all educational programs and services, wherever located or however delivered. FGCU responses to applicable accreditation standards are summarized below:
Mission
- Enrollment of distance learning students during the 2013-2014 academic year contributed to 12% of total course sections taught. Eighty-eight percent of enrollment during the most recent academic year occurred in an on-campus environment. The Guiding Principles, which explicate the mission statement, address the use of technology (e.g., distance learning) in meeting academic career expectations of its constituents.

Curriculum and Instruction
- The faculty assumes primary responsibility for and exercises oversight of distance learning, ensuring both the rigor of programs and the quality of instruction.
- Technology is used appropriately to support the nature and objectives of the distance program and courses.
- The University has an acceptable institutional policy regarding intellectual property (related to ownership of materials, faculty compensation, copyright issues, and the use of revenue derived from the creation and production of software, telecourses, or other media products).
- The academic support services provided to students, including distance students, are appropriate. Additionally, all students of FGCU, regardless of enrollment modality, are eligible for services.
- Program length is appropriate for courses and programs offered through distance learning.
- For all FGCU degree programs offered through distance, each program embodies coherent course of study that is compatible with the institution’s mission and is based upon fields of study appropriate to higher education.
- For all courses offered through any modality, including distance, the institution employs sound and acceptable practices for determining the amount and level of credit awarded and justifies the use of a unit other than semester credit hours by explaining it equivalency.
- FGCU does not currently offer joint degrees or dual degrees through consortia relationships or contractual agreements, nor does it have arrangements with other institutions to offer courses on its behalf.

Faculty
- The number of faculty qualified to develop, design and teach distance learning courses/programs is sufficient.
- There are clear criteria for the evaluation of faculty teaching distance education courses and programs.
- Faculty who teach in distance learning programs and courses receive appropriate training.
Institutional Effectiveness

- Programs offered through distance learning evaluate educational effectiveness, including assessments of student learning outcomes, student retention, and student satisfaction.
- The institution regularly assesses the effectiveness of its provision of library/learning resources and student support services for distance or correspondence education students.

Library and Learning Resources

- Students have access to and can effectively use appropriate library resources.
- Access is provided to laboratories, facilities, and equipment appropriate to the courses or programs.

Student Services

- Students have adequate access to the range of services appropriate to support the programs offered through distance and correspondence education.
- Students in distance or correspondence programs have an adequate procedure for resolving their complaints, and the institution follows its policies and procedures.
- Advertising, recruiting, and admissions information adequately and accurately represent the programs, requirements, and services available to students.
- Documented procedures assure that security of personal information is protected in the conduct of assessments and evaluations and in the dissemination of results.
- Students enrolled in distance education courses are able to use the technology employed, have the equipment necessary to succeed, and are provided assistance in using the technology employed.

Facilities and Finances

- Appropriate equipment and technical expertise required for distance and correspondence education are available.
- The institution, in making distance and correspondence education courses/programs a part of its mission, provides adequate funding for faculty, staff, services, and technological infrastructure to support the methodology.

The tasks, roles, and responsibilities associated with online learning continue to develop and become more complex. The Task Force received numerous comments from stakeholders regarding the need for a central point of contact regarding online learning. The Task Force reviewed how online learning was administered at other SUS institutions. Several universities have a primary office to manage and organize resources related to online learning. Having a centralized office of online learning will allow for a more cohesive, purposeful approach to managing and developing online courses, programs, and resources.
Recommendation Regarding Organizational Structure

Identify an office that will have primary administrative leadership responsibility for online learning. This office will liaise with the senior University leadership, colleges, and other units (e.g., the offices of Academic & Curriculum Support, Business Technology Services, Registrar, and the Lucas Center for Faculty Development) on relevant matters. In collaboration with stakeholders, the designated office could provide leadership in the following areas:

- Develop a vision for online learning that guides purposeful growth and development.
- Provide leadership in proposing and drafting policies and procedures, ensuring conformance with relevant regulations.
- Ensure ongoing assessment including metrics related to performance based funding.
- Develop a five-year strategic plan for online learning.
- Stay abreast of evolving higher education trends related to online learning.
- Identify best practices for online instruction (e.g., class size, delivery methods, student verification processes, and student support services).
- Collaborate with others to provide accurate information to prospective students regarding online learning opportunities.
- Offer professional development related to online pedagogy and associated topics.
- Showcase exemplary online courses and practices.

Funding

Discussion of Funding

As of May 2014, FGCU was the only SUS institution that offered a significant amount of online programming but did not have a separate distance learning fee (Online Learning at FGCU, Presentation to the Innovation and Online Committee, Florida Board of Governors, May 8, 2014). A reliable funding stream is necessary to continue delivering and further develop online education at FGCU. Designated resources are needed to fund initiatives supporting student and faculty needs, additional staff, and technology. Potential budgetary items could include the following:

- Resources to facilitate development of online courses, including faculty incentives for courses meeting certain predetermined criteria developed by the office of online learning in collaboration with faculty.
- On- and off-campus test proctoring solutions, which may include testing centers, software and hardware solutions (such as identity authentication), remote proctoring and webcams to authenticate student identity and monitor student assessment.
- A plan to identify and address needs associated with helpdesk services.
- Technology upgrades which may be necessary to enhance the learning experience (e.g., software, hardware, infrastructure).
• Resources for course support (e.g., graders and teaching assistants, online tutoring services).

Funding options could include the following:

• Allocation of funding from University budget.
• External grants.
• Reexamination of the feasibility of a student fee for online learning.

Recommendation Regarding Funding

Conduct a cost/benefit analysis to identify budget needs, as well as explore options for consistent and reliable funding sources. This could be an initial responsibility of an office of online learning.

Resources and Support Services

Discussion of Resources and Support Services

The Task Force received overwhelming input and feedback indicating an increased need for professional development in the design and delivery of online instruction as well as ongoing coaching and assistance. There is also a need for guidance with integrating technology into hybrid and traditional courses. In addition, feedback received by the Task Force indicated varying levels of need for student preparation in how to access and best utilize features in the learning management system. Potential resources and support needs could include the following:

• Additional staff to assist faculty in online course development.
• A self-paced student online assessment tool to ensure student readiness before students are able to commence an online course.
• Online student tutoring resources.
• Support for students and faculty not experienced with online learning in the form of online and video tutorials.
• Increased learning management system coaching and training resources for faculty.
• Communication and dissemination of information regarding resources/support available (e.g., demonstration learning management course, library support, student mentoring, etc.).
• Creation of a repository for faculty to share content and resources.
Recommendation Regarding Resources and Support Services

Review currently available technology and resources and conduct a needs assessment focusing on ways to support students and faculty in online learning. This could be an ongoing responsibility of an office of online learning.

Quality Instruction

Discussion of Quality Instruction

The Faculty Senate Ad Hoc Committee on the Future Direction of Quality Education was charged with (a) defining quality in online/distance education, (b) identifying strategies to ensure excellence, and (c) proposing methodologies to evaluate quality. The committee’s May 10, 2015 report to the Faculty Senate, noted that “it would be premature if not altogether inappropriate to propose any descriptive ‘definition’ of quality. Instead, we decided to develop a list of “quality indicators” based on the pedagogical values and broad expertise of FGCU teaching faculty, as elicited by a survey consisting of mainly free-answer questions.”

The Faculty Senate Ad Hoc Committee on the Future Direction of Quality Education noted that “the distinction between ‘quality in online education’ and ‘quality face-to-face education’ may not be a particularly useful one.” Respondents to their survey noted that there should be “common standards of quality applicable to any type of course.”

This same theme appeared in the feedback received by the Task Force. One discussion theme at a town hall meeting yielded the following statement: “Need a review of online and face-to-face to ensure that students are learning the same regardless of delivery method.” Students completing an online course should be able to demonstrate the same competencies and skill sets as in the face-to-face versions.

The following topics were repeatedly brought forward at the town hall meetings and in other feedback mechanisms:

- Research, develop, and communicate standards of quality online instruction.
- Access to ongoing professional development for faculty in online course development based on best practice and institutional standards (e.g., Quality Matters), as well as opportunities for faculty to showcase online teaching best practices.
- Assisting individual colleges with processes for faculty peer review of courses.
- Providing access to student training in use of current technologies through online tutorials and videos.
- Online labs and workshops (virtual and hands-on) offered on a regular schedule.
**Recommendation Regarding Quality Instruction**

Provide processes and resources to assist faculty in creating quality courses that deliver meaningful and substantive content through rigorous online instruction.

**Summary**

A renewed focus on online learning is particularly timely given that FGCU faces many challenges related to classroom space, the changing composition of the student body, and the role that online programming plays in attracting students. In addition, the University must be responsive to state-mandated performance criteria, particularly as it relates to student retention. This requires the University to periodically examine its vision and mission.

The Task Force offers the following recommendations:

- **Organizational Structure:** Identify an office that will have primary administrative leadership responsibility for online learning. This office will liaise with the senior University leadership, colleges, and other units (e.g., the offices of Academic and Curriculum Support, Business Technology Services, Registrar, and the Lucas Center for Faculty Development) on relevant matters.

- **Funding:** Conduct a cost/benefit analysis to identify budget needs, as well as explore options for consistent and reliable funding sources. This could be an initial responsibility of an office of online learning.

- **Resources and Support Services:** Review currently available technology and resources and conduct a needs assessment focusing on ways to support students and faculty in online learning. This could be an ongoing responsibility of an office of online learning.

- **Quality Instruction:** Provide processes and resources to assist faculty in creating quality courses that deliver meaningful and substantive content through rigorous online instruction.

The Task Force unanimously concluded that an office of online learning is critical to the continuous improvement of online learning at FGCU. While numerous online classes and several fully online degree programs are currently available, it will be difficult to grow beyond the current inventory—in terms of volume or quality—in a way that best serves the needs of the University’s students, faculty, and staff without a focused approach that an office of online learning could provide.

Further, an office of online learning would enable FGCU to establish a central online learning resource point for faculty, administration, and students. This office could work to develop
quality online learning experiences leading to an enhanced learning environment and educational experience.

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