



**QUALITY MATTERS AUDIT
FREDERICK COMMUNITY COLLEGE'S ONLINE COURSE PROGRAM**

**REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS
AUGUST 2012**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Frederick Community College's Online Course Program began more than a decade ago, building on the College's experience in synchronous forms of distance education, and is steadily growing. As early as 2001, College leaders developed a set of 10 principles to guide distance learning activities, several of which align with QM Program Audit standards. The College currently has three degree programs and 96 courses online, 49 of which have been peer-reviewed and are certified by the Quality Matters Program (QM). Online courses are developed on a standard template by a team that includes subject matter experts and an instructional designer, and once a course has received QM recognition, it becomes a master course that can be taught multiple times by different instructors. A recent reorganization of distributed learning has consolidated the resources supporting distance education; modestly increased staffing; and made online learning more fully integrated in the College's overall instructional operation. FCC courses have the same content in all delivery modalities, and College leaders take pride in the fact that distance learning is situated in the academic unit and does not have enrollment targets, as would be the case if it were part of the continuing education division. Most FCC students are taking online courses to supplement face-to-face classes. A majority of online courses are taught by adjunct faculty.

Goals and challenges for Online Learning Program leaders include improving retention of online students; continuing to strengthen orientation and support services for online learners; and enhancing research and data gathering relevant to online courses and programs. An overarching challenge for College leaders is determining how aggressively to grow the online program and the role online courses and programs will have in the College's development in the next few years.

The report that follows presents the audit team's evaluation of the extent to which the QM Program Audit standards are met in FCC's Online Course Program. The presentation is organized to respond to each of the audit standards. At the conclusion of the report, areas of particular strength are recapped and challenges and recommendations to address them are summarized. The audit team also offers a few observations about opportunities for the College.

THE QUALITY MATTERS PROGRAM AUDIT PROCESS

The audit of Frederick Community College (FCC) was the second pilot by the Quality Matters Program to assess the overall quality of an online program or institution based on standards in the Quality Matters Higher Education Rubric and other best practices compiled by accrediting associations and leading online learning organizations. The review was conducted by Dr. Julie Porosky Hamlin, Executive Director of QM's parent organization, MarylandOnline, and Jean Runyon, Dean, Learning Advancement and the Learning Campus at Anne Arundel Community College and Vice Chair of the MarylandOnline Board of Directors. Dr. Hamlin and Dean Runyon also serve on the Quality Matters Academic Advisory Council, the body that commissions QM Program Audits. The team received a comprehensive, well-documented Self-Study of the Online Course Program and outstanding cooperation from the FCC Program Representative, Dr. Jurgen Hilke, and from all the College's senior leaders, administrative staff, faculty, and students. Data requests were fully and promptly met, and access to requested materials was granted. Though the Self-Study for the audit presents data and information principally from the 2010-2011 academic year, this audit report reflects updates gleaned from the July 2012 campus visit.

The QM Program Audit is based on preparation and submission of a Self-Study of the Online Program by the institution; review of the Self-Study and appended documents by the audit team; and a campus visit by the audit team to conduct follow-up interviews. A draft of the team's report is shared with the Program Representative for correction of errors of fact, and any needed changes are made. The report then is submitted to the Executive Director, Quality Matters Program, who, in consultation with the Quality Matters Academic Advisory Council, determines whether the program meets QM Program Audit quality criteria and advises the Program Representative.

QM Program leaders extend their thanks to all members of the Frederick Community College community who participated in this second Program Audit and contributed to the further refinement of the QM Program Audit standards and process.

INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENT TO THE ONLINE PROGRAM

The overall intent of the Institutional Commitment standard is to confirm the following:

Online instruction is embraced in the institution's mission and planning, and the vision, purpose, and educational philosophy for online education are made clear.

Seven aspects of the institution's commitment are examined in the QM Program Audit.

1. *Institutional leaders' commitment to online education is demonstrated through public statements; strategic planning documents; budgetary support; academic and administrative policies that reflect a concern for unique aspects of the Online Program; setting appropriate targets for retention of online students and regularly monitoring retention rates; and inclusion of*

the Online Program in the institution's compliance with relevant federal, state, or other governmental policies.

In their review of FCC documents and through on-campus interviews, the audit team confirmed that distance education is well-integrated and institutionally promoted and supported at Frederick Community College. The FCC website, a principal information resource for students who take courses both on-campus and online, prominently displays information about "Learning Online" in its menu under "Courses & Programs" at the top of the homepage, requiring only two clicks for students to learn about options for credit and non-credit online courses and programs.

The College does not distinguish among delivery formats in its mission, vision, values, and goals. The FCC mission states "FCC, as a learning college, prepares individuals to meet the challenges of a diverse, global society through quality, accessible, innovative, lifelong learning." The mission statement of the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL), of which the Center for Distributed Learning (CDL) is a part, "encourages exploration and innovation in a variety of learning environments."

Strategic planning, discussed in the next section, budget allocations, and academic and administrative policies reflect institutional support of distance education at FCC. The College's commitment to sustaining and growing its online learning offerings began in 2001, and was demonstrated particularly in a 2008 upgrade to the Blackboard Enterprise learning management system and the integration of Blackboard with the PeopleSoft student information system.

Leaders of FCC's Online Course Program are paying close attention to retention in online courses, which is a few percentage points lower than retention in face-to-face courses, a phenomenon that is nearly universal among online programs nationwide. Rates of retention in FCC's online courses have improved over the past eight years. The College's Director of Distance Learning received a grant from MarylandOnline to conduct a 2010 study, in cooperation with the California Community College System, of students who withdraw from courses and report never having participated in class activities, and efforts to understand reasons for student "no-shows" continue.

The College documented compliance with relevant federal and other external policies, including student authentication as stipulated in the 2008 Higher Education Opportunity Act; copyright and fair use; and provisions for students with disabilities. Compliance with accessibility requirements in online courses is not yet fully implemented and remains a goal. For example, online courses do not meet all of the Quality Matters review standards for accessibility. The FCC Self-Study included an action item related to accessibility compliance.

2. Strategic planning:

a. The Online Program is included in the institutional strategic planning process and documents.

The next edition of FCC's strategic plan is under development and due for completion in 2012. In 2011 the College's Learning Division prepared an Academic Master Plan whose priorities will be reflected in the new strategic plan. A review of the Academic Master Plan confirms a

commitment to distance education. A goal on learning environments includes the objectives of providing flexible learning opportunities and technologically advanced online learning environments that fit students' learning needs and preferences. The College has also completed an environmental scan as part of the strategic planning process. Addressing competition, education, and technology, the scan summarizes a number of trends that center on online learning.

One of the vice presidents interviewed by the audit team noted that cross-divisional communication during the planning and budgeting processes could be improved, and it was anticipated that the newly arrived president would reinforce a college-wide versus division-by-division approach to planning.

b. Goals for online education in institutional strategic plans are matched by resource commitments that support online instructors, online students, and the infrastructure for online instructional delivery.

The audit team concluded the adequacy of resources for FCC's Online Course Program could be looked at in two ways. One perspective highlights that for more than 10 years the College has demonstrated a commitment to deploying a successful, high-quality online program with an appropriate academic and technical infrastructure. Allocations to the online program over the 10-plus years reflect a strategy of incremental growth. Fiscal year 2012 and 2013 allocations, for example, support online program initiatives already in place such as curriculum development, QM course reviews, and learning object database subscriptions; but they do not support new initiatives. Additional allocations would be required to meet some of the goals in the Academic Master Plan.

Another perspective on the adequacy of resource commitments to the College's online program would pose this question: With additional resources, could the Online Course Program grow faster, serve the FCC clientele more fully, reach potential students not yet served, and increase overall enrollments for the College? An answer to the question would depend on an assessment of market saturation and may depend on the willingness of College leaders to shift resources from other areas to fund faster online program growth. Summer 2012 enrollment at FCC was 21% lower than that the previous year, and fall enrollment also was lower at the time of the site visit. Typically, it was reported, online enrollment is higher in the summer than in the fall and spring semesters, with more non-traditional learners enrolling. Could more online credit and continuing education offerings be a key to stimulating overall enrollment growth at the College?

Key pieces seem to be in place for putting more FCC courses online. The online course delivery platform can accommodate additional online courses, and instructional capacity for online growth appears to exist. New resource allocations would be required mainly to support online course production, given the College has moved to an instructional-designer-led, team-based approach to course development. Recently a second instructional designer was added in the Office of Distance Learning, thereby increasing course production capacity. If market readings so warrant, the addition of two more instructional designers could potentially triple or quadruple course production.

Whether to grow the online program faster is a question that will be addressed in the College's current planning cycle. From students, faculty, and administrators who were interviewed, the audit team heard support for continued growth of the College's online offerings. The president spoke of the goal of providing students access to a variety of learning modes and experiences, and faculty members commented on the desirability of being able to offer every course in every modality.

3. The Online Program mission statement states the purpose and goals of the Online Program; places online learning in a broader institutional context; reflects a commitment to quality and quality assurance; and is periodically reviewed and approved by key stakeholders as part of the institution's governing process.

The audit team had the opportunity to review the mission statements of the College, the Center for Teaching and Learning, and the Distance Learning Program, which together reflect a commitment to online learning and to high-quality instruction in all modalities. The FCC mission statement is undergoing review as part of the development of the new edition of the strategic plan during 2012. As early as 2001 the College also developed principles to guide its distance learning mission. The "Principles of the Distance Learning Mission" document includes 10 statements that address characteristics of quality, including assessment of student learning and continuous self-evaluation for program and instructional improvement.

Commendation: The College is commended for having had the foresight to build a commitment to quality into its online offerings from the beginning and to document this commitment in the "Principles of the Distance Learning Mission."

4. *Staffing*

a. Sufficient professional, administrative, and support staff are allocated to carry out the institution's mission and goals for online education.

Online learning is becoming more prominent at FCC. A recent reorganization makes the College's distance learning operations more fully integrated with the instructional and support components that make up the CTL. A newly established Center for Distributed Learning integrates the Office of Distance Learning and the Office of Learning Technologies, with the Director of Distance Learning heading the new, expanded Center. The Director's appointment also is being expanded from a 10-month to 12-month position.

A Staff Management Group that meets weekly includes the seven staff members of the Center for Distributed Learning, representatives from Information Technology and Continuing Education, a part-time faculty consultant for instructional design, and two faculty members responsible for Blackboard training and QM course reviews. The group is charged with making operational decisions affecting online and hybrid courses as well as online learning components of face-to-face courses.

The head of the Center for Teaching and Learning characterized staffing as a challenge for Distributed Learning in the College's efforts to assess and keep up with student demand for

online courses; stay abreast of 21st-century learners' needs and preferences; integrate support services, especially advising; and extend online learning options in non-credit offerings.

b. Staff and faculty engaged in online education are provided with the skills and tools they need to ensure the Online Program is effective.

The audit team was provided with documentation of the College's encouragement of Online Course Program staff's engagement with professional networks and its support of professional development to ensure staff members stay current in the field. The Director of Distance Learning has leadership roles in MarylandOnline and the Quality Matters Program, and an instructional designer led the development of the Certificate for Online Adjunct Teaching (COAT) course, a MarylandOnline-funded project.

Instructors teaching online are required to complete a four-part certification process that includes two segments of training on the Blackboard learning management system, a tutorial for teaching online, and a semester of mentoring. New online instructors participate in a 90-minute, in-person orientation on online pedagogy provided by the Director of Distance Learning, a process that may need to be made scalable as online offerings grow. The College also makes use of the COAT course to train online faculty. Resource allocations for faculty refresher and update training may need to increase as the online program matures.

5. Resource commitments:

a. An adequate long-term commitment to support and sustain the Online Program is clearly articulated.

The College's commitment to the health and growth of the Online Course Program is implied in its current mission statement and spelled out in the mission statements of relevant units, as well as in community and student publications. The commitment is also apparent in budget and technology documents and will be articulated in the strategic plan now being finalized. As noted above, the 2001 "Principles of the Distance Learning Mission" has provided guidelines for distance learning operations for the past decade and clearly articulates a commitment to quality.

b. Resources include staffing, infrastructure, and technology investments.

The College's technology investments have been made according to its 2008-2012 "Technology Strategic Plan," an impressive document prepared by a representative committee that went through a careful process, including a SWOT analysis, to determine the College's technology needs. The plan's purpose is to "provide a unified and inclusive framework for the near- and long-term technology-related needs of the College," and it includes five goals, each with several objectives and identified outcomes, all of which support in different ways the Online Course Program. As earlier noted, the College has invested significantly in its learning management system (LMS) and in the integration of the LMS with the student information system. FCC student satisfaction surveys indicate a substantial majority of students have no difficulty using the LMS. The Chief Technology Officer in an interview with the audit team spoke of continuing challenges, such as improving the IT request process and providing support for iPads, and

praised the excellence of communication and cooperation between her unit and Distributed Learning.

c. The institution has quality control over any externally procured academic or technical components of the Online Program.

This audit standard acknowledges an international trend in online higher education toward the use of commercially produced and maintained learning management systems and of content developed by publishers. FCC's Online Course Program uses instructional materials from textbooks and from online supplements that publishers provide to support online learning. The Self-Study reports that publisher materials are carefully reviewed by teams of faculty and mentions that scrutiny of materials in the textbook selection process has been enhanced indirectly by the Maryland College Textbook Competition and Affordability Act of 2009; compliance with the act requires a careful review. The College also reports measures taken to ensure the quality of video content as the transition was made from telecourses to video-enhanced online courses.

6. Commitments to students and other stakeholders

a. Prospective and current students and stakeholders have access to accurate and up-to-date information about the institution's online offerings, including mission, accreditation, courses and programs, services, policies, fees, recruitment processes and incentives, and other relevant information.

As noted, prospective and current students are provided access to information about the online program on the College's homepage, as well as information about policies, fees, mission, accreditation, and courses and programs. Included in the information provided in the "Learning Online" section is a link to a listing of online and hybrid courses for the current and upcoming semesters, with imbedded links to the course syllabi. Information about FCC's three online degree programs and their requirements online is found at a dedicated website.

b. Online Program offerings result in learning appropriate to the rigor and breadth of the course, program, or degree requirements.

Since FCC has identical content in all courses regardless of modality, judgments regarding rigor and breadth of content will go beyond distance education courses. Beginning in 2005, the College undertook two three-year cycles of course-level outcomes assessments, both focused on high-enrollment general education courses. Very few online courses were included in the assessments, and no separate analysis of the online courses was conducted. Assessment of learning outcomes and the needs of the College with respect to measuring rigor and breadth in online courses is discussed in the Teaching and Learning section of the report.

7. Accreditation: The Online Program is included in the institution's regional accreditation and, if applicable, has appropriate professional accreditation.

Frederick Community College is accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education; its accreditation was most recently reaffirmed in 2006. FCC's Online Course Program is included in the accreditation.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The overall intent of the Teaching and Learning standard is to confirm the following:

A commitment to quality in online education is evident in curriculum and course design, instructional delivery, and practices used in the assessment of student learning in the Online Program.

Three main aspects of teaching and learning, each with several subparts, are examined in the QM Program Audit.

8. Design of courses and curricula:

a. Curricula and individual courses are

i. Approved through standard institutional governance processes.

FCC strategically selects courses to be reformatted for online delivery, some of which are used in the College's fully online degrees and certificates. Three degrees can be completed fully online: General Education, Business Administration, and Emergency Services. FCC recognizes that distance education contributes to the national completion agenda by increasing access to high-quality programs; in addition, distance education expands the institution's capacity to meet the academic, professional, and personal enrichment goals of adult learners.

Curricula as well as individual courses are approved through established institutional governance processes, including approval oversight by the Curriculum Committee. The course and program objectives are established and mandated by the Curriculum Committee; all courses, regardless of delivery method, are expected to have similar outcomes.

ii. Are coherent in their organization and have measurable objectives.

Courses are coherent in their organization. FCC has adopted the QM standards as a foundation for course design and utilizes a team approach for developing master courses. The development and use of master courses contribute to consistency in course design, scale, and access; furthermore, master courses ensure ease of use and navigability in the course delivery platform. As stated in the Self-Study, this approach has "helped to improve the economy of training and the desired degree of coherence among online courses." FCC faculty work closely with instructional designers to produce master materials and course shells that are used across multiple sessions. A standard design template and a common course approach establish consistency and coherence in the course structure across all the online courses.

Commendation: FCC has adopted a master course development model that contributes to standardization and consistency in course design.

Master courses are currently available for 15-week courses; however, the master course design model has not yet been implemented for courses offered in 8-week formats. Courses must be reviewed and updated to maintain currency; the adoption of a new textbook or the migration to a new software application, as examples, will require revisions to a master course. Processes have not yet been finalized for systematically reviewing and updating the master courses.

The audit team noted the need to add the 8-week master course template and to develop a process for routine review of master courses.

Recommendation: Develop master courses for courses offered in 8-week formats and implement policies and processes for reviewing, maintaining, and updating the master courses.

According to FCC's 2012-2013 College catalog, "The primary emphasis of FCC is teaching/learning. Student learning outcomes are assessed to measure program and course effectiveness" (p. 4). Regarding acquisition of the higher-level skills in the Bloom Taxonomy, the FCC catalog lists the following "General Education Goals":

- I. Students will demonstrate College-level communications skills.
- II. Students will demonstrate critical thinking skills.
- III. Students will analyze and interpret ways in which individuals, groups, institutions, or societies behave, function, and influence one another.
- IV. Students will demonstrate quantitative problem solving.
- V. Students will apply scientific reasoning.
- VI. Students will demonstrate an understanding of technology and its uses.
- VII. Students will demonstrate an understanding of and be able to interpret social and educational values.
- VIII. Students will be able to make informed critical responses to the arts and to the human values expressed in all art forms. (p.32)

These general education goals are addressed in individual programs, and they are a focus of course-level assessment as well.

According to the Self-Study, some of the institutionally mandated course and program objectives do not meet QM's expectations for measurability; however, the course module-level objectives do meet the expectations (i.e., are measurable and consistent with course-level objectives). FCC courses that have been QM-reviewed meet Standard 2.2; all current master courses include module-level objectives that meet this standard.

The audit team noted the need to continue progress in ensuring all objectives are measurable.

Recommendation: Review and, as needed, revise the course- and program-level objectives established and mandated by the Curriculum Committee to ensure measurability and alignment.

iii. Are designed with consideration of time and place limitations of students.

Courses are designed with consideration for time and place limitations of students. Three degrees can be completed fully online; students may be required to come to campus to take assessments, or assessments can be completed in a proctored setting. Furthermore, FCC is in the middle of a review process designed to establish time-on-task equivalency for all courses in all formats.

iv. Promote academic integrity.

Frederick Community College is committed to sustaining an environment that actively promotes honesty, dignity, trust, and respect in the institutional policies and professional behavior and interactions. Established institutional policies, such as the Classroom Behavior Policy and Procedures, are applicable to all students and courses regardless of delivery method. As stated in the College catalog, FCC “promotes academic integrity by setting standards of conduct for learning, creating learning environments that encourage and demand honesty in academic work and behaviors, and holding faculty and staff accountable for modeling behaviors that support the development and worth of all students” (p. 141).

FCC has instituted processes to certify that coursework and assessments are completed by the student registered for a course. Registered students are issued a password-protected log-in ID to access the learning management system. The Academic Integrity Policy includes provisions relevant to authentication procedures; distance education students also sign an academic integrity pledge. FCC has processes in place to promote academic integrity in the online course. For example, instructors are encouraged to use a variety of formative and summative and authentic assessments in their distance education courses. The audit report notes that instructors are required to include at least one proctored assessment in a distance education course; students present photo identification at a testing center or educational facility. According to the catalog, this process varies “from course to course; tests and exams are online, but some are proctored in the Testing Center on the home campus” (p. 13). The syllabus template includes a clause that reserves the instructor’s right to retest if grade results from a proctored assessment differ significantly from assessments conducted in a non-proctored environment.

v. Are designed to accommodate different learning styles.

vi. Ensure ease of use and navigability in the course delivery platform.

The audit team was provided with access to several FCC courses: PC114-Hyb, SO102ONL, PC104ONL, and ACCT214ONL. The master course design approach, required faculty training, and instructional design support contribute to the selection of content and activities that accommodate various learning styles. The master course approach has enhanced the quality and consistency of courses offered at FCC. The instructional design approach utilized at FCC ensures ease of use and navigability in the course delivery platform; Blackboard Learn is the learning management used to deliver all online and hybrid courses.

b. Course design reflects widely accepted standards, including

i. Alignment of activities, materials, and assessments with learning objectives and outcomes

ii. Clearly stated instructions on how to meet the course learning objectives.

iii. Interaction between faculty and learners and among learners themselves.

Course design reflects widely accepted standards, including alignment of activities, materials, and assessments with learning objectives and outcomes; instructions on how to meet the course learning objectives; and interaction between faculty and learners and among learners themselves. FCC courses reflect the use of high-quality instructional materials and appropriate technology that enable and enrich student learning. FCC has instituted both an informal and formal course review process; almost 50 of FCC's 90 online courses have met QM expectations to date. Therefore, course design is consistent with QM standards and reflects alignment of activities, materials, and assessments with learning objectives and outcomes; clearly stated instructions on how to meet the course learning objectives; and interaction between faculty and learners and among learners themselves.

iv. Student practice in critical thinking, problem solving, analysis, and synthesis in learning activities.

Several of FCC's "General Education Goals," listed earlier in this section, address critical thinking, problem solving, analysis, and synthesis in learning activities.

General education goals are assessed through College-wide learning outcomes assessment processes in all courses regardless of instructional delivery methods.

v. Current, high-quality instructional materials and appropriate technology that enable and enrich student learning

The Center for Distributed Learning staff work closely with instructors during the course design phase to ensure that the instructional materials align with and support the course outcomes. In 2010, FCC purchased subscriptions to repositories (NBC Learn, INTELECOM, Discover Education, and DCCCD Dallas Telelearning) to provide instructors with additional resources and content for use in their online and hybrid courses.

c. Courses embody good practice in areas such as

i. Standards for instructor accessibility.

Delivery of instruction at FCC is grounded in the program's mission, values, and expectations for student learning. Curricula and course design embody good practice in areas such as assessment of learning, teaching methodologies, standards for instructor accessibility, and feedback. Instructors respond to student emails within 24 -36 hours in a 15-week course; response times are adjusted appropriately based on the length of the course. These standards assure frequent contact between students and faculty and reasonable turnaround time on faculty evaluations of student work.

ii. Student performance feedback mechanisms.

Student performance feedback mechanisms are in place. Courses include formative and/or summative assessments, and submission of mid-term and final grades can provide students with an overall summary of achievement of outcomes as aligned with the course grading policy. An email early alert system connected with the Blackboard grade book is in place; this system can be used to identify and notify at-risk students at various points during the semester. The Vice President for Learning Support reported two concerns about the adequacy of information provided to students about their academic performance. One was that FCC is no longer sending mid-term grades to students. The other is that students who do not regularly check their emails may not receive early alerts and are not aware of the alerts until advisors have the opportunity to follow up.

The audit team noted that mid-term grades not being sent automatically combined with early alert notifications possibly not reaching students could result in students being unaware they are not meeting course requirements, a situation that works against student success.

Recommendation: In furtherance of improving retention of students in online courses, review the adequacy of College-level processes for notifying, before the end of a course, students who may be struggling academically.

iii. Accessibility for individuals with disabilities.

FCC demonstrates a commitment to accessibility for all students. The Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) office assists and supports eligible students with disabilities. The College's accommodation statement is available on the College website. Resources for students with disabilities are outlined on the website "Web Resources for Persons with Disabilities."

FCC's distance education courses are offered in an accessible learning management system. Courses include the following statement: "Blackboard is designed to accommodate students with vision impairments. Whenever possible, video material is close-captioned and/or accompanied by transcripts for hearing impaired students." FCC staff members recognize the importance of universal design and are committed to implementing processes and procedures to ensure that distance education courses meet QM standards 8.2, 8.3, and 8.4 of the 2011-2013 QM Rubric. According to the audit report, "There has been no sustained and consistent attempt as of yet to integrate the relevant QM standards fully into course design, course review, and faculty training." The audit report also notes, "However, as the new 2011-2013 edition of the QM Rubric tightened provisions under Standard 8, FCC compliance with three additional QM standards is likely to remain checkered for the near future." FCC does, however, make every effort to accommodate students with disabilities.

Not meeting all provisions for accessibility disadvantages students who require accommodations in online courses. The audit team urges the staff to set goals for achieving compliance in the near future.

Recommendation: Develop a checklist and timeline for reviewing distance education courses to verify that QM's Standard 8 is met, and implement strategies to address gaps in ADA compliance for distance education courses.

iv. Compliance with copyright and fair-use policies.

FCC has instituted practices to comply with copyright and fair-use policies. FCC has developed a Compliance and Implementation Plan and a policy and procedure to provide guidance to the College community on ways to implement and comply with these requirements; the College has a designated Copyright Resource Agent to oversee compliance.

9. Delivery of instruction

a. Is grounded in the program's mission, values, and expectations for student learning.

FCC embraces the Learning College model, and faculty and staff are committed to maximizing the potential of every student, creating and maintaining a learning environment that is, according to the College president, the “very best it can be.” FCC recognizes that learners should be provided with a variety of delivery options so they can successfully achieve their academic goals. Online education strategically supports and aligns with FCC’s mission. FCC is currently in the process of reviewing and revising the institution’s strategic plan. The revised mission statement (2012) recognizes and embraces distance education as a viable learning option:

With teaching and learning as our primary focus, FCC prepares an increasingly diverse student body to complete their goals of workforce preparation, transfer, career development and personal enrichment with quality, innovative lifelong learning. In traditional and alternative learning environments, we anticipate and respond to the needs of our local, regional and global communities.

FCC recognizes that “a course is a course” and that “good teaching is good teaching.” The College has put in place a governance structure that fosters effective, comprehensive decision making related to distance education. The Director of the Center for Distributed Learning serves on the Learning Leadership Council, the council primarily responsible for strategic planning and decision making in the Learning Division. The distance education function is housed in the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL), leveraging the services and support essential for excellence in education in an integrated fashion. The CTL includes the Center for Academic Success (which includes the library, tutoring program, writing center, and testing center) and the Center for Distributed Learning.

b. Is supported by research and best practice.

Teaching and learning initiatives and strategies are supported by research and best practice. In addition to being an early adopter of QM, FCC through its academic and distance education leaders is engaged in exploring and implementing and promising best practices. For example, the Director of Distance Learning conducted a large-scale, FCC-MarylandOnline student retention study (the “W” Study) with more than 3300 respondents who had withdrawn from an online course. The study highlighted the importance of considering students’ time and place limitations, and the findings were used to implement new initiatives designed to enhance student success and retention at FCC. FCC distance education staff are actively involved in local and

state organizations, such as the Maryland Distance Learning Association (MDLA), Instructional Design Affinity Group (IDAG), and MarylandOnline (MOL); FCC staff often take a leadership role in MOL initiatives such as the Certificate for Adjunct Online Teaching (COAT) course and other MOL-sponsored projects. One of FCC's Principles of Distance Learning demonstrates commitment to research and best practice: "Distance Learning at FCC is committed to a process of continual self-evaluation directed toward program improvement, targeting more effective uses of technology to improve pedagogy, advances in student achievement of intended outcomes, improved retention rates, and effective use of resources."

c. Is continually refined based on assessment of stakeholders' needs and the analysis of student learning outcomes.

The CTL's mission fully embraces and support distance education initiatives and was developed based on assessment of stakeholders' needs:

The Center for Teaching and Learning supports and enhances high-quality instruction and responds to the individual learning, teaching, and support needs of the Frederick Community College community: students, teachers, and staff. The Center for Teaching and Learning encourages exploration and innovation in a variety of learning environments by sharing knowledge and providing tools and resources.

FCC recognizes the need to have a strong infrastructure to support online teaching and learning and is committed to continuous improvement in services and support. The Center for Distributed Learning was recently restructured to more closely integrate the functions of the Office of Distance Learning and the Office of Learning Technologies. The Director of Distance Learning, who heads the Center for Distributed Learning, is primarily responsible for providing direction and leadership for distance education initiatives.

In response to increased enrollment in distance education courses and in recognition that faculty must be fully supported in their endeavors to design and deliver courses, funds were reallocated to support a second instructional designer position. There is a strong institutional commitment to ensuring a highly qualified instructional workforce as evidenced in the breadth and depth of professional development opportunities and support systems for full-time faculty and adjuncts. FCC leaders recognize the importance of adjuncts in furthering the institution's mission and vision. An adjunct oversees faculty development activities, including the adjunct certification program and mentoring for adjuncts; this instructor reports directly to the Assistant Vice President for CTL. An adjunct also manages the QM processes and reviews at the institution and reports to the Director of Distance Learning.

d. Is adaptable to best serve different student learning styles.

e. Accommodates cultural differences among students.

The Center for Teaching and Learning hosts a wide variety of professional development workshops for faculty and staff. The 2010-2011 offerings included Student Disabilities, Teaching Students of Color, Enhancing Your Course to Promote College Completion, Using Motion Pictures as a Teaching Tool, and International Education: What Should It Be? The

variety demonstrates a commitment to meeting the learning needs of a diverse student population.

f. Includes provisions for students with disabilities.

All courses are delivered in an ADA-compliant learning management system. FCC demonstrates a commitment to accessibility for all students. The Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) office assists and supports eligible students with disabilities. Resources for students with disabilities are outlined on the website “Web Resources for Persons with Disabilities.”

10. Assessment of student performance

a. Is evidence-based.

b. Is aligned with course and program objectives.

c. Is designed to accurately measure student attainment of the course educational goals.

Assessment of student performance at FCC is evidence-based and is aligned with course and program objectives. Assessment of College core competencies is embedded in established course outcomes assessment processes. The Self-Study noted that FCC “implemented two-year cycles of course-level outcomes assessments. Both cycles focused on high-enrollment general education courses. Very few online courses were included, and no discrete analysis of those particular assessments is available.” FCC has instituted a program review process for all programs that demonstrate the same level of rigor in curricula and student expectations; a strong emphasis on student learning outcomes assessments has been incorporated into program reviews. FCC has completed the first year of a five-year plan to review all programs; eight programs were reviewed in 2012.

College academic leaders take pride in the comparability of courses across all delivery formats, and an important component is comparability in learning outcomes. The comparability cannot be established without including online courses in assessments, and the Self-Study states that so far they have not been. The audit team notes the omission and offers this recommendation:

Recommendation: Identify specific course(s) offered in multiple delivery formats (e.g., traditional, online, and/or hybrid) and conduct targeted, course-level student learning outcomes assessments to confirm comparable outcomes.

d. Is structured so that students are able to monitor their own learning progress.

e. Yields information that allows faculty to measure the effectiveness of and, as needed, adjust their teaching methods as well as information that can be used in ongoing course design reviews and revisions.

f. Is based on the use of multiple assessment methods to measure different aspects of student performance.

g. Includes formative assessments during the course that support student improvement and success.

Professional development workshops focus on best teaching and formative and summative assessment practices. FCC staff examined 30 online course syllabi; the results show that assessment strategies were varied and ongoing. Furthermore, courses are designed so that students are provided with frequent, substantive feedback so they can monitor their own learning progress. Blackboard tools and features, such as the grade book and reports, also enable students to monitor their progress.

h. Provides for timely and frequent feedback on student progress.

FCC has established protocols for providing feedback to students' emails and assignments.

In summary, although recommendations have been offered to address specific challenges, the audit team found that quality assurance in online education at FCC is addressed holistically, with ownership shared among multiple campus units. In addition, the individual components that contribute to an overall quality program have been identified and are examined and systematically monitored. Quality assurance processes are in place and are evident in course design, delivery, and curriculum. Furthermore, the College recognizes the importance of assuring that learners achieve identified learning outcomes at the course, program, and institutional levels.

Commendation: Administrators, faculty, and staff demonstrate a strong commitment to quality in online education.

LEARNER SUPPORT

The overall intent of the Learner Support standard is to confirm the following:

Support for online learners provides a foundation for student success. Support services are accessible in a format appropriate to online delivery.

Eleven aspects of support for learners are examined in the QM Program Audit and are discussed in this section.

- a. Ensuring learner access to the technologies required in the course.*
- b. Accurate and complete information about skills needed to succeed in an online course.*
- c. Information about required face-to-face elements of the course, if any.*
- d. Information about instructor or course policies, including the course grading policy.*
- e. An orientation to online learning technologies and successful online student practices.*

Instructors, staff, and administrators strongly support and operationalize the Learning College model. It is evident that FCC has instituted academic and administrative practices and services to address students' academic, developmental, and administrative needs.

FCC regularly monitors student success and retention rates and has already implemented initiatives to address retention challenges (which are common to almost all institutions that deliver distance education courses and programs). According to the Self-Study, the number of

students who withdraw from an online course (or who earn an F) has varied but is “still considered significant.” FCC is revising its strategic enrollment retention plan; the renewed focus will include an emphasis on retention of special populations (e.g., at-risk students, online learners.)

Although the staff of Distributed Learning have undertaken admirable initiatives to understand causes of student withdrawal from online courses, achieving an acceptable rate of retention remains a challenge for the College. The audit team encourages continued efforts to improve retention in online courses.

Recommendation: Continue to monitor student success and retention data; implement strategies to promote student success based on data and research.

FCC’s distance education program extends the local institutional boundaries of the College. As noted in the Self-Study, in 2011 FCC had a presence in 16 states, including faculty who live and teach in a state other than Maryland or students who take courses at FCC but who reside in a state other than Maryland. Therefore, it will be increasingly important to address the needs of those who access FCC curricula and services from a distance.

FCC recognizes the importance of student readiness for online learning and the correlation of readiness with student success in a course. The Credit Online website includes a summary of the skills necessary to be successful in an online course, and a student self-assessment also is at the website. Some of the questions and/or responses are a bit dated and could be updated to reflect current practices. Commercially available readiness surveys (such as SmarterMeasure) provide a more extensive review of learners’ characteristics and readiness for an online learning experience than the survey currently used at FCC.

Student expectations, such as information about instructor or course policies, are clearly communicated to the students. Course syllabi include instructor contact information, a summary of evaluation methods, and an overview of policies (e.g., participation, communication, academic integrity). In addition, online and hybrid course templates include a general information section to summarize expectations and to provide additional course information. Instructors are required to send welcome emails to students at the start of a semester that include detailed instructions relevant to the course proceedings.

FCC utilizes Blackboard for the delivery of online, hybrid, and web-enhanced courses. The Blackboard Information site includes general getting-started information including student and faculty tip sheets, student and faculty FAQs, and a getting started checklist. (The checklist, copyright 2003, should be updated to reflect the current version of Blackboard.) First-time online learners are provided with information on how to log-in to a course and how to use the tools and features of a learning management system.

First-time online students have access to an orientation, Blackboard 101. Upon completion of the orientation, students should be able to navigate the Blackboard Learn interface and course environment. The Center for Distributed Learning hosts on-campus orientations for first-time online students prior to the start of each semester. In addition, the students have access to

Blackboard tutorials within the learning management system in the “On Demand Help and Learning Catalog” area.

Augmenting the online tutorials, such as Blackboard 101, FCC offers an on-campus orientation before the start of each semester to provide learners with helpful information about preparing for online learning. The orientation ideally would also be available online. A synchronous web conferencing application (such as Collaborate Live) could be used in the delivery of an online orientation. The orientation to online learning also could be mandatory for students, in essence a non-credit prerequisite to their first online class. Making sure all online students have taken the orientation will help to address retention goals and the problem mentioned by several interviewees that students often “don’t know what they’re getting into” when enrolling in an online course.

The audit team is concerned by the present lack of an online orientation for new online students who cannot attend an on-campus orientation and recommends an online orientation be implemented.

Recommendation: Offer an online orientation for first-time online students as an alternative to the on-campus orientation and consider requiring that students take the orientation either on-campus or online prior to their first online course.

FCC is exploring ways to enhance and expand student services to support online learners and those who enroll in traditional or hybrid courses but access services at a distance. Students may visit the on-campus Writing Center for individual assistance; the “online writing center” provides resources, but they are not comparable to one-on-one assistance. An online writing center is being piloted during the summer of 2012, and FCC will assess the results and may implement on a full-scale if the pilot was deemed successful.

FCC provides the funds and technical assistance to fully support the technological infrastructure necessary to deliver distance education courses. FCC provides all students with online access to learning support services, including but not limited to advising (via email), PeopleSoft (accessible by students, for degree audits), Individual College Academic Plan (ICAP), and an early alert system (tied to PeopleSoft rosters). The learning management system is supported to the same degree as the student data systems and other IT functions.

f. Timely, accessible, and effective technical support.

FCC established a student help desk that is staffed by students for students. The College also developed a system for providing technical assistance to learners; in addition to utilizing on-campus technical support services, students can submit a request for help through Blackboard Assist. Students receive a response from a staff member within five hours during normal FCC business hours. The FCC website includes tutorials for using the Internet (e.g., Internet 101), Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and other software applications.

According to the FCC website, technical assistance is available six days a week: “Hours of operation are Monday - Thursday 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m., Friday 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and

Saturday 8:00 a.m. until 2:00 p.m. except when the college is closed due to holidays or inclement weather. Walk in support is available from 8:00 a.m. until 4:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday.”

Distance education provides the flexibility to participate in classes “anytime, anywhere,” but technical support is provided by the College during limited hours. With the following recommendation the audit team urges extending the availability of College technical support during the round-the-clock hours students may be completing assignments in online courses.

Recommendation: Expand help desk hours and, if feasible, implement 24/7 technical support.

g. Academic and administrative services to address students’ academic, developmental, and administrative needs.

The Support Services website includes additional information about distance learning; this information should be consistent with the information provided at the Center for Teaching and Learning site. For example, the Support Services website includes a link to Distance Learning 101. A student may be confused about which resources to access—Distance Learning 101, Blackboard 101, or Internet 101. FCC discontinued use of Smarthinking for online tutoring; however, online tutoring is offered to all FCC students in a number of subjects through a Blackboard site.

h. Access to electronic library resources and services.

Other services and support include

- Academic support for online learners (study skills, tutoring, writing center, library)
http://www.frederick.edu/courses_and_programs/distance_academicsupport.aspx
- Online writing center (resources)
(http://www.frederick.edu/student_services/writingctr_Onlinecenter.aspx)
- Library resources and services.
http://www.frederick.edu/student_services/library.aspx
- Virtual library orientation
(http://www.frederick.edu/student_services/library/orientation/orientation2/index.html)
- Schedule tool
http://www.frederick.edu/student_services/distancelearning/index.cfm?Content=distance_Learning_right_time.htm
- Virtual career center
http://www.frederick.edu/student_services/careercenter/index.cfm
- Online bookstore
<http://bookstore.frederick.edu/home.aspx>

i. Accommodations for learning disabilities.

FCC demonstrates a commitment to accessibility for all students. The Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) office assists and supports eligible students with disabilities. The College's accommodation statement is available on the College website. Resources for students with disabilities are outlined on the website "Web Resources for Persons with Disabilities." As noted in the previous section, accommodations for students in online courses require strengthening.

j. Counseling for individual learner needs.

Counseling/advising is available on campus and online through "email advising."

k. Information about institutional policies with which the student is expected to comply.

Information about institutional policies is available on the College's website and disseminated to students who enroll in courses through a variety of methods, including the Student Handbook. Online course syllabi include information about the instructor, evaluation methods, participation and communication policies, grading policies, and course-specific information.

Commendation: FCC demonstrates a commitment to student success and provides a comprehensive array of services and support for online learners.

FACULTY SUPPORT

The overall intent of the Faculty Support standard is to confirm the following:

Support provided to faculty takes account of the demands of teaching in the online medium and promotes effective online instruction.

Eight aspects of support for faculty are examined in the QM Program Audit and are discussed in this section.

Support for online faculty includes

a. A policy on class size appropriate for the course delivery model adopted for the online classroom.

FCC has established course enrollment caps of 20 students to optimize opportunities for learner-learner and learner-instructor interactions and engagements; the first time a course is offered, the cap is set at 15 students.

b. Required training, orientation, and/or mentoring programs, including training in course delivery as well as in the use of the course learning management system.

The Center for Teaching and Learning offers a comprehensive professional development program for FCC educators. FCC recognizes that faculty must be well prepared to teach in the online learning environment and has implemented best practices to provide training and support for faculty. Faculty must complete training prior to teaching and/or developing an online or hybrid course. FCC offers training in online pedagogy as well as in the use of the course learning management system. First-time online faculty must complete BB (Blackboard) Basics, BB Advanced, and a tutorial for Teaching Online. As stated in the self-study, the tutorial is designed to acquaint faculty with “most of the important quality standards for the design of online courses and with the routines and procedures of successfully teaching an online course.” The tutorial also helps instructors get a course “ready for a formal QM peer review.”

The FCC website includes faculty resources, tip sheets, and tutorials. Given that only 38% of faculty are full-time, FCC relies on adjuncts teach many of the distance education courses. It may not always be feasible for an instructor to come to campus for the 90-minute orientation with the Director of Distance Learning. The development of the orientation and training in multiple formats (e.g., blended, online, synchronous) will increase access to professional development opportunities for faculty and staff.

FCC developed “Web Courses: Standards of Best Practice” in January 2000; this document addresses pedagogical practices, standards of best practice, technical and organizational standards of best practice, access for sensory-impaired students, and resources. While many of the identified practices are current and relevant, some are outdated.

c. Timely, effective technical support.

Faculty and staff have access to timely, effective technical support; the technical support is provided by the FCC help desk, through the use of Blackboard Assist, and by the Office of Distributed Learning. Instructors receive a response from help desk staff within five hours during normal FCC business hours.

d. Availability of up-to-date learning management tools.

Blackboard is FCC’s learning management system and includes up-to-date tools and features. FCC supports additional software/hardware applications; software and hardware used in support of distance education courses are piloted and tested prior to implementation. The FCC website includes tutorials for using the learning management system; several of these tutorials are Blackboard Release 6 and should be updated to Blackboard 9.1.

e. Access to professional development opportunities.

FCC also offers credit for the completion of training. Faculty earn one credit for the completion of Online Teaching Tools, three credits for completion of the Online Teaching Certificate, and one credit each for completion of QM’s peer reviewer or master reviewer courses.

FCC recognizes that instructors must be well prepared to teach a distance education course. Instructors must meet with the Director of Distance Learning prior to teaching an online or

hybrid course; this 90-minute orientation is conducted on campus. FCC established a mentoring program for first-time online instructors in 2009. The mentoring program partners an experienced online educator with an instructor who is new to teaching online; the mentor acts as a resource and guide for the new instructor. FCC has clearly defined the role of the mentor and mentee; exit interviews are completed by both the mentor and instructor at the end of the mentoring partnership. New full-time faculty participate in a year-long orientation program, and an orientation is conducted for adjuncts to familiarize them with resources available at FCC and to College policies and protocols.

One of FCC's instructional designers co-developed the Certificate for Online Adjunct Teaching (COAT), a MarylandOnline certificate program. COAT is an online training course designed for instructors who have experience teaching in the traditional (face-to-face) classroom and are interested in transitioning to online teaching. This inter-institutional project provides training for adjunct faculty on the competencies needed to teach online. Twenty-one FCC adjuncts and one full-time instructor have successfully completed COAT.

f. Regular feedback on faculty performance.

FCC faculty are evaluated through established, approved governance processes. Student course evaluations, which faculty are required to administer in two courses per year, use an instrument that gathers feedback about the instructor, course, and general education requirements; in addition, the instrument includes a student self-evaluation section. The instrument questions are tailored for traditional and online courses, except for the questions in the general education section which are the same for traditional or online courses. FCC utilizes Blackboard's "Evaluation Kit," and the end-of-course evaluations are administered from within the online course. Instructors have access to the results of the evaluations when the evaluation process has ended; faculty can then utilize the results to impact teaching and learning in subsequent semesters. In addition to student evaluation and faculty self-reflection practices, FCC has established protocols and processes for conducting peer observations in online courses.

g. Access to professional development opportunities.

Faculty and staff have access to professional development opportunities on campus; in addition, FCC supports attendance at local, state, and national events. Given the number of adjuncts who teach online courses, offering training in multiple modalities (e.g., online, synchronous) will expand access to those who are not able to attend on-campus workshops.

h. Opportunities for faculty to participate in the institution's planning, curriculum development, and program evaluation processes related to online instruction.

Distance education staff and faculty are actively engaged in College governance, strategic planning, and committee assignments. FCC's 2001 "Principles for the Distance Learning Mission" states, "Faculty has a role in considering and deciding issues of faculty evaluation, workload, compensation, and ownership of intellectual property resulting from the design, development and/or teaching of an electronically offered course or program." The Director of Distance Learning serves on the institution's Learning Leadership Council (the entity primarily

responsible for strategic planning in the division of Learning). Distance education staff are actively involved in strategic and technology planning at the institutional level.

As part of its examination of practices that meet the Faculty Support standard, the audit team met with members of the Center for Distributed Learning staff, full-time faculty, and adjunct faculty during the site visit. The interviewees shared strengths of the program, including strong institutional support, a culture that embraces online education, resources to support operations, a commitment to professional development, and a highly trained workforce (faculty and staff). It is evident that FCC is providing the training and support needed to ensure that all faculty are well prepared to teach learners “anytime, anywhere.”

Commendation: FCC employs highly qualified faculty and provides extensive support and training for full-time faculty and adjuncts who teach distance education courses.

EVALUATION OF EFFECTIVENESS

The overall intent of the Evaluation of Effectiveness standard is to confirm the following:

Ongoing evaluation of online offerings and the use of evaluation results for improvement are integral to the Online Program.

Two aspects of evaluating effectiveness are examined in the QM Program Audit, each with several components.

13. *Online Program administrators conduct ongoing evaluations that provide for regular collection and analysis of data based on national, state, and/or program metrics and principles of good practice; use of clearly articulated measures to evaluate learners; measurement of student achievement and satisfaction based on valid and reliable assessment techniques; evaluation of faculty instructional practices to assure course quality, using clear, consistent policies, measures, and procedures; periodic evaluation of courses to ensure quality, consistency with the curriculum, currency, and advancement of the student learning objectives; periodic evaluation of the effectiveness of the course learning management system; and regular evaluation of any externally developed components of the online program.*

Senior officers interviewed by the audit team indicated centralized institutional research at FCC historically had not been as strong as it could be and that even some recent studies, as noted in the Self-Study, did not fully include the distance education activities of the College. Interviewees thought it would be a priority of the new president to strengthen institutional research. As a unit, Distributed Learning collects a good deal of data on online courses and students.

A recent research initiative that encompasses the distance learning component is a 2011 College environmental scan intended to identify trends in competition, education, and technology. Eleven of the trends are pertinent to online learning and provide current local, regional, and national data that are being used in the continuing development of the Online Course Program.

Another research initiative, mentioned earlier, entailed two studies undertaken by the Director of Distance Learning, the second under a grant from MarylandOnline, to examine reasons for student withdrawal from online courses. The second “W” Study surveyed more than 3,000 students from Maryland and California. Over the past three years the Director also has undertaken a College- and MarylandOnline-supported project to describe and define instructor competencies in online teaching. As reported in the Self-Study, the results of the Instructor Competencies Project will be incorporated in training for online faculty at FCC.

The audit team found ample evidence of attention to sound practice in the conduct of distance education at the College. In 2000, early in the development of FCC’s online courses, College administrators developed a set of standards, “Web Courses: Standards of Best Practice,” to inform course development and delivery at the time, and most are relevant 12 years later. In the intervening years, FCC has affiliated with or drawn from a number of online learning peer networks and professional organizations, including the Instructional Technology Council, the Sloan Consortium, the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies (WCET), and EDUCAUSE. FCC is a charter member of the MarylandOnline consortium and subscribes to the Quality Matters Program.

Commendation: The College is recognized for not only following best practice in online learning but also for leading the national online higher education community in the development and testing of e-learning best practice.

Measures used to evaluate students are spelled out in the College grading policy, which is included in the academic catalog, and the course syllabus template requires instructors to state grading policy as well as course objectives. Measurement of student achievement and satisfaction, discussed in the Teaching and Learning section, is conducted routinely, with a framework in place to measure student satisfaction both on a set of elements common to all courses and a set specific to online courses. The latter set measures satisfaction with such features as ease of navigation and instructor responsiveness. The Director of Distance Learning and staff regularly review results of satisfaction surveys and follow up as needed.

Provisions for evaluation of faculty instructional practice are well-explained in the faculty handbook and include procedures for peer observation of online courses. The acting chief academic officer noted that through these procedures peer observation of online courses is significantly more rigorous than observation of face-to-face courses. While review of instructor teaching performance in online courses, as distinct from course design, is a responsibility of academic departments, Distributed Learning staff also review evaluation results for online instructors as part of the unit’s responsibility for the overall effectiveness of the Online Course Program.

The process for evaluation of full-time faculty has more components than does the process for adjunct faculty. The required evaluations for full-time faculty include student course evaluation, peer observation, an annual self-evaluation, portfolio submission, and an annual assessment completed by the department chair. Adjunct faculty evaluation includes classroom observation of teaching by the department chair or designee and student course evaluations.

The College has a goal of increasing the percent of full-time faculty overall, and meeting the goal should achieve a balance between full-time and adjunct instructors in the online as well as face-to-face classroom. Given the high proportion of FCC online courses taught by adjunct faculty, the audit team noted the desirability of having comparable quality assurance mechanisms in place for both adjunct and full-time faculty and urges academic leaders to ensure the evaluation processes for adjuncts are sufficiently rigorous and comprehensive to ensure high-quality online instruction.

Recommendation: As an aspect of ensuring quality in online courses, review the rigor and frequency of provisions for evaluation of adjunct faculty and strengthen the processes as needed.

Through the College's commitment to the Quality Matters Program, evaluation of online courses is conducted regularly. More than half of the 96 online courses have undergone a formal QM review, with re-reviews of older courses scheduled and 10 new reviews in academic year 11-12. Although the QM review focuses on design rather than delivery, outcomes of reviews, which are monitored, also have implications for instructional practice, course content, and learning outcomes assessment. Informal reviews also are conducted in connection with textbook updates and student complaints.

As reported by the Assistant Vice President and Dean for Academic and Professional Studies, program-level assessment began two years ago, and it is expected that within five years all programs will have been assessed, prior to the College's next evaluation by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education.

The effectiveness of the College's Blackboard learning management system is routinely evaluated by online program staff and IT staff and through student satisfaction surveys. Concurrent with the commitment to Blackboard, an experiment with the use of Moodle also is underway.

While the functionality of externally developed course components is reviewed at the beginning of each semester, externally developed course content itself is not on a regular review schedule apart from the review system in place for textbooks. Externally developed course components include publishers' companion websites and cartridges and "premium content" offered by publishers or producers of learning object collections on third-party server platforms. Scrutiny of both content and functionality of those components by online program staff and faculty is thorough at the design stage of a master course or with the introduction of a new textbook edition. Instructors are required to check the functionality of all course components, including those externally developed, every semester before the start of a course. The review of publisher cartridge content for a new text edition is triggered automatically as the loading of cartridge content is centralized in the Office of Distance Learning.

Since externally developed course components are not now being systematically evaluated, the audit team highlights the need for these evaluations to be added to reviews of course materials.

Recommendation: As external content becomes a standard component of online and web-enhanced courses, incorporate a review of this content in departmental course and curriculum review processes.

14. *A culture of continuous program improvement is shown by the following:*

a. Use of strategic and operational planning and evaluation to continuously improve educational programs and services, including monitoring online student persistence against retention targets.

As noted above, College leaders' attention to best practices in the development and operation of the Online Learning Program from its beginning is admirable. Adherence to the guidelines in the planning document "Web Courses: Standards of Best Practice," together with investments in research on online student dropout, the use of QM reviews, and routine monitoring of multiple success indicators in online courses demonstrates a culture of continuous course improvement.

b. Sharing of evaluation results with program stakeholders.

Evaluation results are routinely shared with various constituencies in the College community, including the Board of Trustees, the Learning Leadership Council, and online faculty. Distributed Learning also has comprehensive reports of distance learning evaluation results available in print for all years dating back to 2004.

c. Support for advancement of the Online Program's vision and mission; current scholarship in relevant academic disciplines as well as in teaching and learning practice; and student achievement.

Pride in and support for the Online Course Program was made explicit in every interview conducted by the audit team, leading to the conclusion that all campus constituencies embrace online learning, some quite enthusiastically, and approve of its quality at FCC. When asked to list the strengths of the program, staff of Distributed Learning mentioned first institutional support at a high level. A staff member also noted that a culture of acceptance for online learning is spreading among the faculty by word-of-mouth. Another mentioned a healthy climate of self-scrutiny, enabling faculty and administrators to gauge and respond to needs for improvement in the online program. Challenges the staff mentioned were strengthening training for adjunct faculty, including making training available online, and ensuring processes and systems keep pace with growth in the online program as the College goes through the transition from hand-crafted online courses to standardized, team-based production.

The Self-Study provided a helpful perspective on conceptual shifts in the development of online learning at FCC:

1. The shift from distance education to distance learning, promoting a more learner-centered model while retaining the premise of the physical distance between instructor and learner.

2. The shift from distance learning to online learning, highlighting best practices in online pedagogy that apply regardless whether a course is fully online or web-enhanced.
3. The shift from online learning to distributed learning as a learner-centered model that emphasizes the distribution of learning through different media and in a variety of learning environments.

It is likely this same shift has occurred at most institutions with mature online learning programs, though it is noteworthy that Frederick Community College's leaders can articulate it and have shown themselves to be thought leaders in the field of e-learning.

The most senior College officers interviewed by the audit team confirmed a commitment to the complete integration of online instruction with face-to-face instruction at FCC and acknowledged having not yet fully achieved this goal of seamlessness in all operations. The audit team was able to reinforce questions already being asked as College leaders pinpoint areas where further strengthening or integration is needed. These areas include student orientation, student support services, student learning outcomes assessment, faculty training, course review, course evaluation, and institutional research.

d. Provisions for satisfaction surveys by students; evaluation of curriculum and instruction as they relate to student achievement; regular online faculty performance evaluations; reviewing and updating policies and procedures; reviewing the appropriateness, effectiveness, and quality of teaching and learning technologies; and regular online course reviews.

Provisions for evaluation of all aspects of the Online Course Program, from student satisfaction to the effectiveness of teaching and learning technologies, have been discussed in previous sections of this report, with strengths and weaknesses noted.

e. Effective use of data to drive instructional and management decision-making.

The Self-Study amply documented the diligence of online program staff in collecting data to be used both in determining the effectiveness of online courses and in planning for the continued development of the Online Course Program. As suggested above, it is important the College as a whole have the same commitment to the use of data to guide academic and operational decisions for courses and programs in all modalities.

SUMMARY OF COMMENDATIONS

Commendation: The College is commended for having had the foresight to build a commitment to quality into its online offerings from the beginning and to document this commitment in the "Principles of the Distance Learning Mission."

Commendation: Administrators, faculty, and staff demonstrate a strong commitment to quality in online education.

Commendation: FCC has adopted a master course development model that contributes to standardization and consistency in course design.

Commendation: FCC demonstrates a commitment to student success and provides a comprehensive array of services and support for online learners.

Commendation: FCC employs highly qualified faculty and provides extensive support and training for full-time faculty and adjuncts who teach distance education courses.

Commendation: The College is recognized for not only following best practice in online learning but also for leading the national online higher education community in the development and testing of e-learning best practice.

SUMMARY OF CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO ADDRESS THEM

Teaching and Learning

The audit team noted the need to add the 8-week master course template and to develop a process for routine review of master courses.

Recommendation: Develop master courses for courses offered in 8-week formats and implement procedures and processes for reviewing, maintaining, and updating the master courses.

The audit team noted the need to continue progress in ensuring all objectives are measurable.

Recommendation: Review and, as needed, revise the course- and program-level objectives established and mandated by the Curriculum Committee to ensure measurability and alignment.

The audit team noted that mid-term grades not being sent automatically combined with early alert notifications possibly not reaching students could result in students being unaware they are not meeting course requirements, a situation that works against student success.

Recommendation: In furtherance of improving retention of students in online courses, review the adequacy of College-level processes for notifying, before the end of a course, students who may be struggling academically.

Not meeting all provisions for accessibility disadvantages students who require accommodations in online courses. The audit team urges the staff to set goals for achieving compliance in the near future.

Recommendation: Develop a checklist and timeline for reviewing distance education courses to verify that QM's Standard 8 is met, and implement strategies to address gaps in ADA compliance for distance education courses.

College academic leaders take pride in the comparability of courses across all delivery formats, and an important component is comparability in learning outcomes. The comparability cannot be established without including online courses in assessments, and the Self-Study states that so far they have not been. The audit team notes the omission and offers this recommendation:

Recommendation: Identify specific course(s) offered in multiple delivery formats (e.g., traditional, online, and/or hybrid) and conduct targeted, course-level student learning outcomes assessments to confirm comparable outcomes.

Learner Support

Although the staff of Distributed Learning have undertaken admirable initiatives to understand causes of student withdrawal from online courses, achieving an acceptable rate of retention remains a challenge for the College. The audit team encourages continued efforts to improve retention in online courses.

Recommendation: Continue to monitor student success and retention data; implement strategies to promote student success based on data and research.

The audit team is concerned by the present lack of an online orientation for new online students who cannot attend an on-campus orientation and offers this recommendation:

Recommendation: Offer an online orientation for first-time online students as an alternative to the on-campus orientation and consider requiring that students take the orientation either on-campus or online prior to their first online course.

Distance education provides the flexibility to participate in classes “anytime, anywhere,” but technical support is provided by the College during limited hours. With the following recommendation the audit team urges extending the availability of College technical support during the round-the-clock hours students may be completing assignments in online courses.

Recommendation: Expand help desk hours and, if feasible, implement 24/7 technical support.

Evaluation of Effectiveness

Given the high proportion of FCC online courses being taught by adjunct faculty, the audit team noted the desirability of having comparable quality assurance mechanisms in place for both adjunct and full-time faculty and urges academic leaders to ensure the evaluation processes for adjuncts are sufficiently rigorous and comprehensive to ensure high-quality online instruction.

Recommendation: As an aspect of ensuring quality in online courses, review the rigor and frequency of provisions for evaluation of adjunct faculty and strengthen the processes as needed.

Since externally developed course components are not now being systematically evaluated, the audit team highlights the need for these evaluations to be added to reviews of course materials.

Recommendation: As external content becomes a standard component of online and web-enhanced courses, incorporate a review of this content in departmental course and curriculum review processes.

OPPORTUNITIES

On the basis of reading the Self-Study and conducting the campus visit, the audit team shares a few observations about potential opportunities. Though they are on topics not encompassed by the Program Audit standards, the opportunities, which are interrelated, were suggested by the audit team's examination of the Online Course Program.

Online Programs and College Growth. As discussed under Institutional Commitment, accelerating the growth of the Online Course Program could boost overall College enrollment. Key to the strategy would be adding more fully online programs in FCC's areas of curricular strength so the College could be a one-stop provider for students seeking degrees that do not require travel to campus. With some marketing, the College could reach unserved populations locally and regionally as well as provide more options for currently enrolled students.

Continuing Education and Contract Training. FCC offers an array of career-oriented programs that prepare students for immediate entry into the workforce. The Continuing Education/Customized Training division offers non-credit courses in business, computers, real estate, and general interest, as well as contract training for business and industry. FCC leaders are encouraged to explore opportunities to develop in-house online continuing education courses and online contract training to expand outreach.

Blended/Hybrid Course Development. Three degrees (General Education, Business Administration, and Emergency Services) can be completed fully online at FCC. In the judgment of the audit team, the College has the capacity to expand the number of degrees and courses that are offered in online and hybrid formats. Providing students with access to courses in a variety of modalities will ensure that students are able to take courses in the formats that contribute to their success. In addition, the strategic scheduling of hybrids will address space and capacity-building initiatives on campus.