

NORTHERN ESSEX COMMUNITY COLLEGE ACADEMIC MASTER PLAN 2012-2015: ADVANCING THE STUDENT LEARNING EXPERIENCE

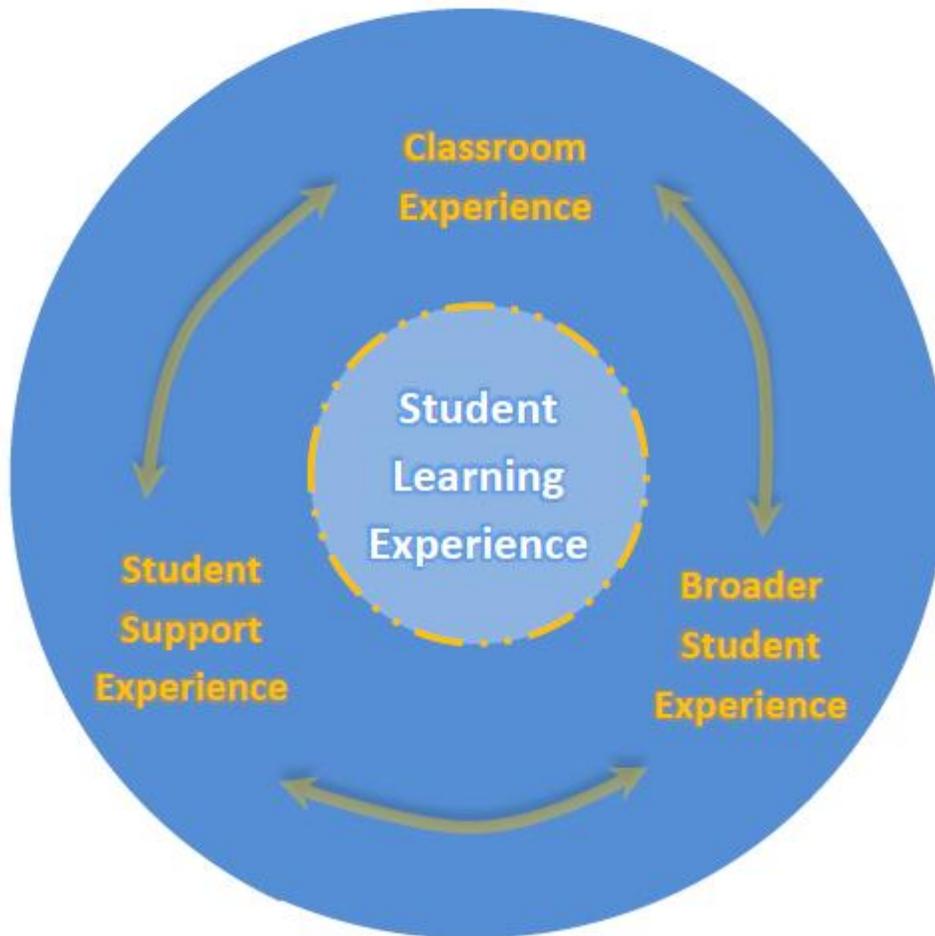
Rationale

Academic Affairs at Northern Essex Community College is a beehive of activity. The passion of instructors, tutors, advisors, deans, office staff, administrators, and others for their work with students is evident. The long hours they put in—whether measured in stacks of papers to be graded, the launch of new student-success initiatives, or the exchange of late evening and weekend emails—are obvious. It is hard to imagine us all working any harder.

And yet, we know that despite all the effort, there is more we should accomplish. Our students are not as successful as we all want them to be. Course completion rates are rising, but in Fall 2011 almost 30 percent of students failed, withdrew, or finished an NECC class with less than a grade of C. This percentage was higher for our younger, male, and Hispanic students. It was much higher in our first college-level writing course, English Composition (almost 40 percent). If we are working as hard as we can and resource constraints prevent us from adding many new people, is it possible to get better results? If so, how do we start?

The answer is in our mission to help students learn and reach their educational goals. The core of this mission is to provide an excellent student learning experience. That experience takes many forms and occurs in many places. Obviously, instructors and their courses (credit or non-credit, in the classroom, online, or hybrid) represent one crucial component of student learning. Academic advising, tutoring, the library, career counseling, and other forms of student academic support are a second vital piece of the puzzle. The broader student experience—whether it involves direct participation in service learning, Early College, co-op, and clubs, or is felt through activities like course scheduling, planning and budgeting, and professional development for faculty and staff—is a final important element.

Around these three elements of the core student learning experience—the classroom experience, the student support experience, and the broader student experience—we build our Academic Master Plan for 2012-2015 (see diagram below). Each element contains strategic priorities for our work. Each priority contains objectives that help our students to learn and reach their educational goals while also helping the institution to conserve and focus its resources effectively. In this way, the new Academic Master Plan serves the student, the institution, and the wider community. This plan positions Academic Affairs to support students in developing their roles as citizens, as productive contributors to the economy, and as educated human beings.



Academic Affairs Priorities for 2012-2015

This Academic Master Plan establishes twelve priorities for Academic Affairs at Northern Essex Community College (NECC), grouped by the three elements of the student learning experience.

I. Classroom Experience

Excellence in the classroom is the foundation of what we do at NECC. The priorities of the Classroom Experience promote excellence by strengthening the academic standards of the college and creating a culture of active learning, seriousness, and rigor for all our students. They recognize the centrality to student learning of an ample, high-quality, and diverse faculty. The priorities also emphasize the need for a rigorous and relevant curriculum both at the level of general education and within each of the academic programs (credit and non-credit) that we offer. Finally, this Academic Master Plan calls for a coherent and convenient mix of modalities in which the Classroom Experience will occur.

Priorities:

1. **Implement college-wide Core Academic Skills:** Braiding college-wide Core Academic Skills in discipline-specific programs is an important step in NECC's continued efforts to maintain high educational standards and to meet the needs of our society and economy.

- Steadily increase the percentage of programs that include courses designated as intensive in all core skills over the next three academic years, measured in Fall 2012, Fall 2013, and Fall 2014.
- Launch the intensive course requirement for students as soon as practicable.
- Provide professional development and other assistance to faculty to aid them in incorporating appropriate Core Academic Skills in their courses.

2. **Build and strengthen the faculty:** We will continue to hire more full-time professors, as well as recognize and encourage the work of our DCE faculty. Where possible, we will hire a more diverse group of instructors who reflect the composition of our student body and its cultural background.

- Work toward achieving 65% of daytime classes taught by full-time faculty.
- Ensure that all faculty members have opportunities to stay current in their disciplines and hone their teaching skills, which will enrich students' educational experiences and keep NECC's curricula vital. Provide increased opportunities to attend state and national conferences that are clearly relevant to the faculty members' areas of teaching to improve their subject-area knowledge and learn new pedagogies.

3. **Develop a strategic plan for Distance Education:** Online and hybrid courses have become an important part of NECC's educational offerings. We need to ensure we are offering the right mix of distance and traditional courses and that student learning in each is comparable.

- Identify programs that can/should be delivered online and in hybrid formats to meet existing and untapped student demand.
- Identify and execute strategies to eliminate the gap in completion rates between online and traditional sections of the same courses.

4. **Streamline and increase the impact of Program Review and Outcomes Assessment:** NECC has been a leader among its peers in conducting Program Review and Outcomes Assessment. We need to continue to closely evaluate our programs and measure what our students learn, while also assuring that our assessment processes require no more time or effort than necessary.

- Expand committee work currently underway to evaluate the Program Review process (subcommittee of Academic Affairs Leadership Team) and Outcomes Assessment (Institutional Assessment Committee), including the integration of program chair/coordinator feedback.

- Implement a streamlined Program Review and Outcomes Assessment process. This should include aligning program-specific accreditation processes as much as possible with the college's Program Review process to reduce duplication of effort.

II. Student Support Experience

Our students face unique challenges and need support to succeed both inside and outside of the classroom. The priorities of the Student Support Experience promote the engagement of NECC students with faculty, staff, and peers. The result is the creation of connections that are vital early in students' NECC careers—when they are most likely to withdraw—and that extend beyond the first weeks on campus to sustain them in their progress toward their educational goals. The Student Support Experience at NECC seeks to link students with support services, improve students' relationships with the faculty and staff who provide academic support, and increase learning, retention, and graduation rates through better connections.

Priorities:

1. Assist students in defining their educational and career goals and in building a plan to reach them:

Students are most likely to reach goals that have been thought through carefully. We will help every student develop an academic plan to achieve his/her goals.

- Provide a network of resources that will help identify each student's path to success. Resources may include career, academic, and transfer counseling; alternative ways of gaining credit; and job-placement skills. Advocate for the research into and feasibility of developing on-campus counseling services for non-academic student issues in the appropriate area of the college.
- Maximize and extend use of DegreeWorks to clarify each student's course sequence and schedule throughout his/her NECC career. Provide the training necessary for students, staff, and faculty to use DegreeWorks effectively.

2. Improve and expand opportunities for the success of new students: To prepare more students to succeed at NECC, we must continue to improve and implement curricula that teach students the collaborative and integrative thinking skills and learning strategies necessary for college success. In order to have the most positive impact on retention and early academic achievement, these interventions should target students early in their college careers. Such curricula include the College Success Seminar (CSS), Learning Communities (LCs), and other orientation activities.

- Significantly increase the number of CSS sections offered each semester, and develop discipline-specific sections of CSS to prepare students to excel in their chosen fields.
- Develop alternative ways to deliver CSS content, such as workshops, orientation programming, and online courses for those students who cannot enroll in a full-semester course.
- Develop Learning Communities that incorporate CSS in order to improve learning, success, and retention by linking content areas with the skills they require. Also, create LCs that include

developmental and gateway courses to foster critical/interdisciplinary thinking strategies along with practical learning skills.

- Continue to rigorously assess the effectiveness of early, collaborative, and integrative courses and other activities in helping more students reach their educational goals.

3. **Maximize tutoring services:** Improve the delivery of tutoring by providing equitable services that are easily accessible to all academic levels of NECC students. Based on the recommendations of an FY12 process-management team that has been charged with evaluating current processes, we will support and advocate for the necessary resources to implement the best model for services. Overall objectives include:

- Optimize access to all services on both the Haverhill and Lawrence campuses.
- Develop expanded, equitable services on the Lawrence campus.
- Provide appropriate space on both campuses that will allow for the best possible delivery of tutoring services.
- Respond to the data that reflects the effectiveness of Supplemental Instruction by supporting and thoughtfully expanding SI courses.

4. **Develop NECC's library facilities and services:** NECC's libraries are a central and visible academic support available to all students. We should expand the library space on the Lawrence campus and pursue a library-based, one-stop, student-support area on both the Haverhill and Lawrence campuses.

- Expand and upgrade the Lawrence campus site to a comprehensive library that can support a fully developed urban campus.
- Develop a plan for a centralized library-based Learning Commons on each campus that includes learning-related support services. This area should assist students with library needs; general questions; Blackboard, IT, and helpdesk issues; and technology-related support. This support must be delivered via an education professional, or a trained peer tutor/leader, so that the focus stays on student learning.

III. **Broader Student Experience**

In addition to classroom-focused activity and support services offered for students, Academic Affairs includes a realm that comprises two other sets of activities and processes that influence learning. We call this realm the "Broader Student Experience." The first part of this realm encompasses additional opportunities for direct learning that occur from the time of students' original contact with the college until graduation. It begins with outreach to high school students and adult learners, continues with experiential learning (e.g., co-ops, internships, service learning, international travel), and ends with a commitment to career guidance and support. The second part of the realm includes those administrative processes that undergird Academic Affairs and influence learning less directly, but no less

decidedly (for instance, course scheduling, and planning and budgeting). Learning will be maximized if these processes help students move through their programs at NECC smoothly while allowing faculty to spend as much time as possible teaching, advisors advising, and tutors tutoring.

Priorities:

1. **Improve college readiness:** Success in both learning and achieving educational goals begins before a student arrives at college. We need to work with our partners in the community to ensure NECC students are prepared for college work at the start of their NECC careers.

- Expand relationships with K-12 schools and Adult Basic Education programs to ensure curriculum alignment and consistent assessment practices.
- Expand dual-enrollment opportunities for high school students, particularly the Early College program, emphasizing the benefits of exposure to college-readiness skills prior to matriculation.

2. **Increase experiential learning opportunities:** Students are able to better define their life and educational goals, and to practice and sharpen their skills, if engaged in experiential learning. We will expand the opportunities for these experiences (e.g., co-ops, internships, service learning, and international travel).

- Build strong co-op, service learning, internship, and related experiential learning programs, paying particular attention to the interrelationship of these programs. Work toward making these and other interdisciplinary experiences routine offerings rather than exceptions.
- Develop smoother pathways—in both directions—between non-credit and credit learning activities to allow students to pursue both gainful employment and further education, including transfer to four-year institutions.
- Work vigorously with employers to understand and meet their needs, and match those needs to the goals of our students for gainful employment. Aggressively emphasize our ability to move students beyond training and into education, which includes both technical competencies and “soft” skills needed in a sophisticated Massachusetts economy.

3. **Design and deliver excellent academic facilities:** Buildings and campus grounds contribute to student perceptions of NECC viscerally and, to some extent, unconsciously. Our facilities must reflect the quality of the education that we offer our students. We will work with Administration and Finance and Institutional Advancement to design and fund labs, classrooms, and other academic facility needs.

- Shape the expansion of the Lawrence campus to include facilities for the growth of existing, and creation of new, academic programs. Provide space to offer academic support services commensurate with student needs and that are equitable across campuses.
- Plan for integration of Riverwalk into NECC’s academic programming needs, with a particular focus on making it a center of non-credit/credit pathways for students.

- Update academic facilities in Haverhill, especially the C, E, and B buildings.

4. **Streamline administrative processes:** Inefficient, time-consuming administrative processes rob faculty and staff of time better spent working with students, and rob administrators of time to build community partnerships, seek new sources of revenue, and plan for the future. We will examine and change our procedures to maximize the focus on student learning.

- Advocate for a process-management team on the master scheduling process, and use the academic plans created in DegreeWorks to improve the precision of our course scheduling.
- Examine divisional/organizational processes and structure, as well as administration/faculty division of labor, to seek time- and effort-saving efficiencies.
- Consider the need for organizational and administrative structures within Academic Affairs to promote resource development through grants and other revenue opportunities.

Advancing the student learning experience means remembering that amidst the many initiatives NECC is pursuing and the myriad bureaucratic challenges we deal with every day, our mission is to help students learn and reach their academic goals. The twelve priorities in this plan focus us on that mission and strive to reduce distractions—bureaucratic or otherwise—to it. In this way the plan will allow us to achieve more student success without more faculty and staff time and effort.